

CONVERSATIONS WITH KAFKA

NOTES AND REMINISCENCES

BY GUSTAV JANOUGH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY MAX BROD

TRANSLATED BY GORONWY REES

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PREFACE

MAX BROD'S INTRODUCTION and Gustav Janouch's opening sentences to this book are in themselves sufficient explanation of its genesis and of its place in Kafka's life. Indeed, in view of these two authors' personal friendship with Kafka, and Dr Brod's unrivalled knowledge of his life and his work, any further comment may seem unnecessary and even impertinent. Yet to some readers at least the local setting of these *Conversations with Kafka* may be unfamiliar, and some aspects of them surprising, and to such readers an additional word of introduction may not be unhelpful.

The *Conversations*, for all their directness and simplicity, are compiled with such literary skill that they seem to convey not only Kafka's words, gestures, physical appearance, tone of voice, but also the very air of time and place and circumstance in which Kafka and his young friend took their walks together. This atmosphere which they breathe is a very special one, perhaps now never to be recovered; only less vivid than the impression they give of Kafka's personality is the sense of the city of Prague itself, to which Kafka was at once so native and so alien. In one of the conversations Kafka says that the distance from the Karpfengasse, in the Jewish quarter, to his homeland is immeasurably far, but from the Jewish quarter to the Teinkirche is much, much farther; and his remark seems to crystallize everything which both bound him to Prague and alienated him from it. For it is to a particular part of Prague that these conversations belong, the Judenstadt or Jewish quarter, with its medieval synagogue and its ancient Jewish cemetery; and the Judenstadt is not only a physical but a spiritual locality. Kafka's walks may begin at the insurance office on the Poříč, the business centre of modern Prague; across the river is the Hradschin, the

fortress which today, as for so many centuries, is the seat of an alien power; from the quay where sometimes he walks springs the great bridge which carries the statues of the twelve Kings of Bohemia; the walks end at Hermann Kafka's shop in the baroque palace built by a German noble. But the city in which he and his friend walk and talk is not the Prague of the Czechs, nor the Prague of the Germans, but the Prague of the Jews, the Prague, as Kafka himself says, of the Ghetto, still alive despite the destruction of all its buildings except its most ancient monuments. So firmly are the conversations placed in their setting, that now to the many ghosts which haunt the wonderful city we must add the tall, stooping figure of the writer and the boy as they pursue their way from the Pořič along the Altstädter Ring to the Kinsky Palace.

It is, however, as ghosts that they walk. The world they represent has vanished beyond recovery. Indeed, it may well be that *The Trial* and *The Castle* are its most solid and enduring monuments. For the association of Kafka and the Judenstadt is no accident of time and place. Those who care to trace the personal histories of the many artists and writers mentioned in these pages will find that they compose one of the most terrible documents in European history. Among them are Milena Jesenská, with whom Kafka was once in love, dead in a concentration camp; Ernst Lederer, dead in a concentration camp, with mother, wife, sister, and brother; Josef Čapek, dead in a concentration camp; Ernst Weiss, dead by his own hand; Erich Hirt, fate unknown; Otto Pick, dead in exile; Rudolf Schildkraut, dead in exile; Rudolf Fuchs, dead in exile; Ludwig Winder, in Palestine; Felix Weltsch, in Palestine; Johannes Urzidil, in New York; Johannes R. Becher, in Berlin. Like the Baron de Charlus' sonorous death roll of his friends, it is a list which recalls an irrecoverable past, but also commemorates a terrible fatality to Europe. For this roll of death, suicide, and exile records the destruction of a complete cultural world, which mediated between the East and the West of Europe: moreover, and even more tragic, this destruction was only a part of the annihilation of the 6,000,000

Jews of Central Europe from whom the peculiar culture to which Kafka belonged drew a large part of its sustenance.

This is not the place to analyse the special virtues and vices of that world which, open to East and West, was also to a large extent self-enclosed. It is, however, relevant to note that within it the Jews played a special part, and that Kafka, himself a Jew and a convinced Zionist, was in many ways representative of it. It would indeed be easy to say that Kafka himself belonged to this world so completely, and with such self-consciousness, that he foresaw its end. For what else is the terrible death of Josef K. in *The Trial*, with the executioner twisting the knife three times in his heart, dying, as he says, 'like a dog, as if the shame of it would outlive him', but the end of Kafka's own people; what else is *The Castle* but a Zionist epic of that people's effort to found a community and a home?

The answer to such questions is, of course, that *The Trial* and *The Castle* are much else besides. In part they are, as Max Brod points out, autobiography; in part also, and more profoundly, they are religious exercises, 'a form of prayer'. What seems certain, however, is that in the position of his own race, on the last stage of its century-old trek towards its ancient home, yet on the eve of the worst pogrom that has yet been known, Kafka found a myth so closely related to a universal reality that through it he was able to express, not only his specifically Zionist beliefs, but his entire response to the human situation. For Kafka, in a sense, every human being was a Jew, as he indicates when he says of anti-semitism, 'They beat the Jews and murder humanity'.

One of the merits of these *Conversations* is that in them Kafka himself reveals, more directly and explicitly than elsewhere, to what an extent the Jewish problem absorbed and dominated his thoughts. It is not so much, however, that the Jewish problem obsessed him exclusively but rather that his extreme self-consciousness as a Jew coloured his thoughts on every problem and led him to give his ideas a specifically Jewish formulation. Sometimes, it is evident, this was carried to extremes which led to complete

misunderstanding and bewilderment on the part of his young companion, no greater, however, than the misunderstandings it has inspired in many of his critics and interpreters. Indeed, one might say that wherever Kafka seems most obscure one must interpret him, as he himself puts it, 'in a Jewish sense'. This is perhaps particularly true when he is concerned, as so often in these conversations, with what for him were the two fundamental ideas of the Truth and the Law, ideas which for him were inextricably intertwined, and in relation to which it would be possible to define all his other ideas. For if a large part of Kafka's work was devoted to analysing, with a rabbinical minuteness and complexity, problems of responsibility, of guilt, and of sin, yet his statement of these problems can be understood only in the light of his mystical and religious view of what constitutes truth and law. For guilt and sin are for him conceivable only as a negation of truth and a departure from the law. Again, if the idea of alienation, whether from the father, or from society, or from God, is everywhere and always dominant in him, and the root of the sense of isolation and loneliness of which he so often speaks here, yet it is not merely a negative idea (though at times he speaks as if it were and then condemns himself for his pessimism, 'which is a sin'); it is the idea of separation, a fall, from a state of being which is subject to the law, and being subject to law can be sought and grasped as truth. For Kafka, in practice, the effort to end this alienation took the form of Zionism, the belief that he and his race could only be saved by a return to the promised land; yet this belief had its foundation in a religious, and still profoundly Jewish, sense that this land was promised only because there they might create that community under law which was their historical and their divine mission.

Considered in this light, Kafka's writings are one of the last great gifts of the Jewish people to the Europe which, failing to assimilate them, persecuted them and expelled them. And Kafka's struggle to discover, create, accept a state of being which is subject to law and revealed as truth is equally one of Europe's last great

efforts to master the irrational and accidental. By reason of this struggle, it is tempting to compare Kafka with another Jewish writer, Proust, who in this century, with the same almost over-scrupulous awareness of the difficulties which face any attempt to discover a truth underlying human life and a law which its development exhibits, nevertheless with equal heroism persisted in the attempt. It is this quality of heroism in their aims and in their achievement which makes Kafka and Proust most alike among the writers of this century and sets them apart from the others. For while others may compare with Proust or with Kafka in subtlety and rigour of analysis, there are no others who, with the same power of observation and penetration, the same mastery of a psychological calculus for measuring the smallest, most fatal, of human actions, still persist, in face of the evidence, in believing men capable of greatness.

In Kafka this belief gives to his heroes a genuine nobility and grandeur that are otherwise absent from modern European literature. It is a nobility conferred by Kafka's conviction that every single act of every single minute of every hour of every day is a moment in a moral struggle which faces men inescapably with the possibility of terrible defeat or, less probably, indeed almost impossibly, of victory. The intensity with which Kafka held this conviction often makes Kafka himself and his heroes absurd; absurdity is indeed the very air of their existence; nevertheless, despite or because of absurdity, they never cease to be noble because, even in their greatest humiliation and degradation, they still preserve the quality of being men, which for Kafka is precisely the possibility of being judged. 'I am a man under judgement', he says, and means that he is a man with a right to be judged, even though sentence will certainly be passed.

It is because, at so many points and on so many topics, these conversations express Kafka's preoccupation with the problems of moral responsibility that they are of such particular value. And if at the same time they emphasize that in this preoccupation Kafka

misunderstanding and bewilderment on the part of his young companion, no greater, however, than the misunderstandings it has inspired in many of his critics and interpreters. Indeed, one might say that wherever Kafka seems most obscure one must interpret him, as he himself puts it, 'in a Jewish sense'. This is perhaps particularly true when he is concerned, as so often in these conversations, with what for him were the two fundamental ideas of the Truth and the Law, ideas which for him were inextricably intertwined, and in relation to which it would be possible to define all his other ideas. For if a large part of Kafka's work was devoted to analysing, with a rabbinical minuteness and complexity, problems of responsibility, of guilt, and of sin, yet his statement of these problems can be understood only in the light of his mystical and religious view of what constitutes truth and law. For guilt and sin are for him conceivable only as a negation of truth and a departure from the law. Again, if the idea of alienation, whether from the father, or from society, or from God, is everywhere and always dominant in him, and the root of the sense of isolation and loneliness of which he so often speaks here, yet it is not merely a negative idea (though at times he speaks as if it were and then condemns himself for his pessimism, 'which is a sin'); it is the idea of separation, a fall, from a state of being which is subject to the law, and being subject to law can be sought and grasped as truth. For Kafka, in practice, the effort to end this alienation took the form of Zionism, the belief that he and his race could only be saved by a return to the promised land; yet this belief had its foundation in a religious, and still profoundly Jewish, sense that this land was promised only because there they might create that community under law which was their historical and their divine mission.

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saw himself as a representative of his own people, they will perhaps serve to dissipate many misconceptions not only about Kafka, who too often has been admired as much for his weakness as his strength, but about his people, whom Europe owes so immeasurable a debt and has repaid with such immeasurable cruelty. It may be that one day they will once again return to play their part in the tradition they have so enriched. It may be that that tradition will itself perish and the final expulsion of the Jews be seen to coincide with its death blow. Until such possibilities have been decided, Kafka's work will remain as an indestructible monument to the greatness his people achieved even in the wilderness, a symbol of the experience, the struggle, and the suffering, not only of himself but of his nation.

GORONWY REES

INTRODUCTION

by

MAX BROD

FEW WRITERS HAVE HAD THE FATE which was that of Franz Kafka: alive, to remain almost entirely unknown; dead, to become world famous almost overnight.

In Franz Kafka's case such a fate loses its harshness, because he was completely indifferent to fame. Writing was for him (as he says in one of his journals) 'a form of prayer'. All his efforts were concentrated on spiritual fulfilment, on achieving a life which should be immaculately pure. It would not be true to say that he did not care what the world thought of him. It was simply that he had no time to worry about its opinion. His life was entirely absorbed by the effort to achieve the highest that lies within man's power; by the urge, intensified to the point of suffering and almost to madness, to eradicate from himself every vice, every human failing, while examining his own weaknesses with a microscopic care; to achieve that communion with God which in his aphorisms he describes as 'the indestructible'. In this, Kafka was of all modern writers the most akin to Tolstoy. One sentence of his states his religious position clearly: 'Man cannot live without an enduring faith in something indestructible within him.'

Few paid any attention to him during his lifetime.

Yet if, as we have said, Kafka was entirely without vanity and ambition, he nevertheless observed the fact of his own isolation with a kind of melancholy irony. I remember that after the publication of his first book *The Consideration* (*Die Betrachtung*), he said

to me, in roughly the following words (the reader should understand that the firm of André was the largest bookseller in Prague): 'Yesterday I talked to Herr André, and he told me that his shop had sold eleven copies of my book. Now I myself bought ten copies there. I should dearly like to know who bought the eleventh.'

So matters stood in Kafka's lifetime. Today, however, one can scarcely open a copy of a German, French, English, American, or Italian review without meeting Kafka's name.

The crude light which illuminates Kafka's personality today has not unnaturally led to various distortions. We may, however, safely ignore them, trusting to precisely that element of the 'indestructible' which Kafka himself preached. In other words, with the passage of time the true outlines of his complex personality, which today provokes so much controversy, will appear as they really were.

Nevertheless, it is both a matter for rejoicing and a corrective, when today Kafka's character is displayed in its true and essential proportions; and especially by the evidence of witnesses who knew Kafka personally. Thus there came recently into my hands the *Reminiscences of Kafka*, written by a friend of his, Friedrich Thieberger, now living in Jerusalem; again, Frau Dora Dymant, Kafka's companion during the last years of his life and up to the moment of his death (she died in London in 1952), during an all too brief stay in Israel has thrown great light on her relationship with Kafka, both in her public lectures and in private conversations, which in great part have been recorded by Felix Weltsch.

To this class of evidence belong Gustav Janouch's remarkable reminiscences, which have the particular value that their author recorded Kafka's words at the time when they were spoken; just as Eckermann recorded Goethe's statements immediately after each conversation and so bequeathed to us that invaluable source of understanding of Goethe's true nature.

Janouch has himself explained about his own career, the origin

of the *Conversations with Kafka* and the history of his manuscript. Here perhaps I may add how the manuscript came into my hands, and something of how it completes our knowledge of Kafka's life during the period following the end of March 1920, that is to say, from the day when Janouch first met Kafka. It is a period about which, until recently, little has been published: thus Janouch's book fills a gap.

In May 1947, that is eight years after I finally left my birthplace, Prague, I received a letter from there which began with the words: 'I do not know if you will still remember me. I am the musician about whom you wrote in the *Prager Tagblatt* shortly before you left Prague: also it was I who was responsible for the publication in Czech of *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*), by Josef Florian.' The writer asked whether he might send me the entries from his diary about Franz Kafka, with a view to publication. 'Franz Kafka is my youth – and more. So you can imagine my suspense', Janouch wrote in a second letter.

After a long delay the manuscript arrived, and owing to pressure of work on me at that time remained for some time unread. Then my secretary, Frau Ester Hoffe, to whom I am so deeply indebted for her help in arranging and editing Franz Kafka's literary remains, took possession of the manuscript, and after reading it told me that it was a very valuable and important work. In turn, I read the manuscript myself, and was struck by the wealth of new impressions it conveyed, all bearing unmistakably the stamp of Kafka's genius. Even his physical appearance, his manner of speech, his gentle and expressive habit of gesticulation, and other physical traits were all vividly recorded. I felt as if my friend had come to life again and that moment entered my room. Once again I heard him talk, felt his brilliant and lively glance rest upon me, saw his quiet suffering smile, and felt myself once more possessed and moved by his wisdom.

Not long afterwards Dora Dymant made her visit to Israel, and I read her Janouch's still unpublished book. She was at once deeply

impressed by it, and in all Janouch's notes recognized Kafka's style and way of thought. For her the book was like meeting Kafka again, and she was overcome. Thus two witnesses guarantee the authenticity of these conversations; soon afterwards a third appeared. Kafka's *Letters to Milena* were published, edited by my friend Willy Haas. They had been preserved for over twenty years in the strong-room of a Prague bank, and I had not known of their existence. I read the letters, which in my opinion are among the greatest love letters of all time and one day will take their place beside the passionate and humble letters of Julie de l'Éspinasse. Here again, from time to time, I came upon the timid young poet, Gustav Janouch, who brought his first poems for criticism to the Kafka he so much admired, argued with him, and, quite clearly, irritated him, occupied as he was with very different ideas and passions. Thus, seen from another angle, the whole background to the conversations, of which Janouch inevitably gives a one-sided account, appears, not without irony, in quite a different perspective, yet for that very reason all the more authentic.

Moreover, Janouch has already appeared in my biography of Kafka, which was first published in 1937. True he appears only in a reflected light, to be precise, in the form of his father, and anonymously. In my third chapter I describe Kafka's gift for friendship with his colleagues in the office where he worked, the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution, and add, 'even with the very simple and very eccentric'. I quote as an example an inspector who had written a memorandum which Franz gave me. I have now unearthed that memorandum, and at the moment it lies on the desk before me. It is in typescript, begins with the words *NOS EXULES FILII EVAE IN HAC LACRIMARUM VALLE*, and contains, as Kafka has noted in his own handwriting, 'the ecstatic programme of a man of fifty', designed to effect 'a union between Eastern Jewry (Delila) and the Slavs (Ursus – the Slav of today), the salvation of both, and the begetting of Samson, the new religiously creative man'. The imaginative and original author of this

memorandum is in fact Janouch's father. At the same time I met the father personally, as later I was to meet the son.

For Kafka himself the whole period of his friendship with Janouch was dominated by the star of 'Milena Jesenská-Pollak'. Janouch met Kafka at the end of March 1920. Kafka's journals are silent about the period from January 1920 to October 15, 1921: the relevant notebooks or pages are missing. Kafka's first entry on October 15, 1921, shows that he had handed over all his journals to Milena. It is possible that he destroyed all the sections referring to his love affair. After his death Milena brought me all the journals, and also the manuscripts of the novels, *Amerika* and *Das Schloss*, which she had preserved and which were intended for me. In a letter to me after Kafka's death Milena writes: 'His manuscripts and journals (in no way meant for me and originating from the time before he knew me, about fifteen large notebooks) are in my hands, and if you want them are at your disposal. That was his wish, and he begged me to show them to no one else, and only when he was dead.' I quote this word for word from the imperfect German of the author, who in her native language, Czech, was an admirable writer and stylist greatly admired by Kafka. Kafka's journal entries up to May 1922 about Milena, whom he refers to as M., follow in those sections of his journal which I later found elsewhere. Their passionate relationship, which at first brought Kafka the greatest happiness, soon turned to tragedy, and I possess a letter of Kafka's begging me to prevent Milena from seeing him again.

This, therefore, is the sombre background to the conversations which Janouch has transmitted to us. It gives some idea of the immense self-control which Kafka exercised on nearly all occasions – except when addressing his journal or in the most intimate conversation – that he refers only indirectly to the great sorrow which afflicted him and shows himself only as a wise, objective, and philosophical observer of world events, of national and class conflicts and of religions.

The words of Kafka, as transmitted by Janouch, give an

impression of authenticity and genuineness; they bear the unmistakable mark of Kafka's conversational style, which was, if possible, even more concise and compressed than his written style. It was quite impossible for Kafka to say anything that was not significant; I have never heard a trivial phrase from his mouth. Yet he never strained to give a brilliant point to his sentences; everything was unforced and easy, it was original by nature, and did not have to strive after originality. If he had nothing important to say, he was silent. And the subjects which are discussed in the conversations with Janouch are also familiar to me as a result of innumerable other conversations, and I could not fail to recognize in them the dominating sphere of interests which occupied Kafka's mind.

In my biography of Kafka I have discussed with a brief comment the entire period to which Janouch is a witness. Since Milena was then still alive, I wrote with reserve. In the meanwhile we have learnt more of this wonderful woman from Margarethe Buber-Neumann's book (*A Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler*), her terrible death in a concentration camp, and also the miraculous and inspiring strength which she imparted to all with whom she came in contact. In his journal (January 18, 1922) Kafka describes the essence of her character as 'fearlessness'. Further evidence is now available in Kafka's letters to her and in Willy Haas' introduction, with the important facts which it supplies. In a certain sense also, Janouch's notes reflect the rays of Milena's existence, although her name is not mentioned. But much of what Kafka says to Janouch can be properly understood, and can only be properly appreciated, only if one realizes that Kafka, who at this time (as the conversations show) was particularly absorbed by the Jewish problem, was in love with Milena, a Czech and a Gentile. Moreover, her two friends were both married to Jews, and her own husband was also a Jew. Her marriage had caused a violent conflict with her father, who was a particularly rabid Czech nationalist. In such a situation, to Kafka novel and disturbing, faced with such complications, Kafka acquired a deeper insight into the Jewish problem. His commen-

tary on it is to be found, as I only realized after reading the *Conversations* with Janouch and the *Letters to Milena*, in his great novel, *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*), that wonderful ballad of the stranger, the homeless one, who wishes to strike his roots into the country of his choice, but never succeeds. Despite the wider, indeed religious and universal themes with which *The Castle* is concerned, the autobiographical element should not be overlooked. Janouch unconsciously makes an important contribution to our understanding of the situation, on which further light will one day be thrown by Milena's letters to me (eight letters in all, containing a penetrating analysis of Kafka and his relationship to her), my own notes on that period of Kafka's life, together with Kafka's and Milena's personal confidences to me (unpublished, because deliberately omitted from my biography). At the present time, no more need be said than this: *The Castle* reflects, in a distorted form, Kafka's love affair with Milena, described with a curious scepticism and prejudice which perhaps offered Kafka his only way out of the crisis. Milena, who appears in caricature in the novel as 'Frieda', makes determined efforts to save Kafka (K.), she unites herself to him, she sets up house with him in poverty and distress, yet gladly, deliberately, she wishes to be his for ever and so to lead him back to the freshness and immediacy of real life; but as soon as K. agrees, grasps the hand which she offers, her former associations, which dominate her, reassert themselves (the 'Castle', her race, society, and above all the sinister Herr Klamm, in whom one may recognize a nightmare picture of Milena's legal husband, with whom she could never break completely), and their dreamed-of happiness comes to a sudden end; for K. will not accept compromises, and his bride, for all her good intentions, is also not one of those who try to evade the choice of 'all or nothing' and who know how to find the middle way of diplomacy. At the same time it is clear that in K. the will to radical salvation is even more uncompromising than in Frieda, who burns with too insubstantial a fire and too easily gives way to disillusion. The parallel between truth and the fiction can be

pursued even further, and is brought out especially in K.'s self-torturing character (he sees himself as an impostor). Milena's women friends, who dissuaded her from her choice, in the novel find their apotheosis in the legendary, fateful figure of the 'Landlady', who to some extent plays the part of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Frieda's strange jealousy and contempt of Olga in the novel are the counterpart to the attitude which, according to the letters, Milena adopted towards J. W., to whom at that time Kafka was engaged. She categorically demanded that Kafka should break off all relations with W. and her family. Kafka himself regarded her demand as harsh and even unjust, but nevertheless he obeyed. Such fragments of reality are to be found throughout the novel, yet one is only inspired with even greater admiration, when one realizes that from these fragments Kafka has raised a structure which towers above them all, a work of art, ominous, obscured in twilight, prophetic, in which the writer has imaginatively re-created and re-fashioned the materials of life. The importance of autobiographical elements in the genesis of a work of art should certainly not be exaggerated; but if one entirely underestimates them, one can too easily arrive at a mistaken view.

Thus Kafka's novel *The Castle* both provides the stage for, and lies behind the scenes of, the *Conversations* which follow.

Kafka wrote the novel between 1921 and 1922. The earliest date I can provide for his employment on the novel is March 15, 1922, when Kafka read to me a large portion of the beginning of the work in progress. Similar themes certainly appear long before in his journals (e.g., on June 11, 1914; *Seduction in the Village*), and I have even attempted to trace the material of his novel to his school-boy reading (of the classic Czech novel by Božena Němcová, *The Grandmother*, in which a village is also dominated by a strange castle). But this does not prevent us from recognizing that the relationship with Milena was the occasion which filled the author's mind to overflowing with the heady liquor which intoxicated him and inspired him to the composition of *The Castle*. The following

Conversations, together with Kafka's letters to Milena and Milena's letters to me, provide the indispensable documentation for this period of Kafka's life, all the more important because during this period Kafka's journal is entirely missing, and even during the few remaining years of his life is extremely defective.

Tel-Aviv

October 1952

I FIRST met the writer Franz Kafka in the year 1920.

In 1926 I collaborated in the Czech edition of his story *The Metamorphosis*, translated by Ludwig Vrána, and published by Josef Florian.

In the summer months of 1926 I translated for Josef Florian six stories from Kafka's book, *A Country Doctor*. Only one of these six translations into Czech appeared in print. This was the story: *A Dream*, which appeared in 1929 as an introduction to a series of six original etchings, on the theme of *The Metamorphosis*, by the German painter Otto Coester.

* * *

At the same time Josef Florian asked me to arrange my notes and entries in my journal on the subject of Franz Kafka and prepare them for publication in Czech.

I therefore copied the relevant entries in my diary from the various notebooks on to separate sheets and gave the Czech manuscript to Josef Florian. But my notes were never published, as I fell out with Josef Florian.

Then came long years of restless wandering, culminating in the misery of the second world war and the confusion and troubles of the present day. I experienced deadly fear, persecution and imprisonment, animal hunger, filth and cold, the stupid brutality of officialdom, and chaos as the principle underlying an apparently rational world; Kafka's twilight kingdom of shadows became a perfectly ordinary day-to-day experience.

* * *

I remember him once saying to me, 'Often many long years must pass before the ear is ripe for a certain story. But human beings must die – like our parents and indeed everything which we love and fear – before we can understand them properly.'

I heard his voice again, I saw his office, his desk, and out of his window the yellow wall of the old Prague hotel, *Zum goldenen Fasan*.

I remembered the manuscript which I gave to Josef Florian years ago, searched among my books and papers, in my own house and my friends', and found both the Czech and German drafts of my long-lost original. In the strangely alien and yet so familiar lines I saw the more than twenty-two-year-old image of myself. Much was still immature. I would gladly have altered this detail or that, and yet in the childish eyes there still remained the slightly stooping shadow of Kafka's tall figure.

I therefore restricted myself to selecting, arranging, and transcribing my old reminiscences.

* * *

One day at the end of March 1920 my father told me at supper to call on him the following morning at his office.

'I know how often you shirk school to go to the city library,' he said. 'So tomorrow you can come to see me. And dress yourself decently. We shall pay a call.'

I asked him where we were going together.

It seemed to me that my curiosity amused him. But he gave me no explanation.

'Do not ask questions,' he said. 'Don't be inquisitive, and prepare for a surprise.'

The next day when, shortly before midday, I appeared in his office on the third floor of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution, he inspected me carefully from top to toe, opened the middle drawer of his desk, took out a green file inscribed *Gustav*,

laid it before him and gave me a long look. After a while he said :

‘Why are you standing? Take a seat.’ The anxious expression on my face provoked a faint mischievous narrowing of his eyelids. ‘Don’t be afraid, I’m not going to be angry with you,’ he began in a friendly manner. ‘I want to talk to you as a friend to a friend. Forget that I am your father and listen to me. You write poems.’

He looked at me as if he were going to present me with a bill.

‘How do you know?’ I stammered. ‘How did you find out?’

‘It’s quite simple,’ said my father. ‘Each month I get a large electric-light bill. I looked into the reasons for our increased consumption, and I discovered that you have the light on in your room till late at night. I wanted to know what you were doing, and so I kept my eyes open. I found out that you write and write, and always destroy what you have written, or else hide it bashfully in the piano. So one morning when you were in school I took a look at the things.’

‘And?’

I swallowed hard.

‘And nothing,’ said my father. ‘I found a black notebook with the title, *The Book of Experience*. I was interested. But, all the same, when I discovered it was your diary, I put it aside. I have no desire to ransack your soul.’

‘But you read the poems?’

‘Yes, those I did read. They were in a dark-coloured portfolio inscribed *The Book of Beauty*. Many of them I could not understand. Some of them I can only describe as stupid.’

‘Why did you read them?’

I was seventeen years old, and therefore any intimacy with me was an act of *lèse-majesté*.

‘Why should I not read them? Why should I not acquaint myself with your work? I very much wanted to hear a professional opinion by a competent authority. So I had the poems dictated and typewritten in the office.’

'Which of the poems did you copy?'

'All of them,' answered my father. 'I do not respect only what I myself understand. After all, I wanted a criticism not of my taste, but of your work. So I had everything copied and given to Dr Kafka for his opinion.'

'Who is this Dr Kafka? You have never even mentioned him.'

'He's a good friend of Max Brod,' explained my father. 'Max Brod dedicated his novel *Tycho Brahe's Way to God* to him.'

'But he is the author of *The Metamorphosis*!' I exclaimed. 'An extraordinary story. Do you know him?'

My father nodded.

'He is in our legal department.'

'What did he say about my poems?'

'He praised them. I thought he was only being polite. But then he asked me to introduce you to him. So I told him that you were coming today.'

'So that is the visit you spoke of.'

'Yes, that is the visit, you scribbler.'

My father conducted me down to the second floor, where we entered a fairly large, well-furnished office.

Behind one of two desks standing side by side sat a tall, slim man. He had black hair combed back, a bony nose, wonderful grey-blue eyes under a strikingly narrow forehead, and bitter-sweet, smiling lips.

'This is certainly he,' he said, instead of greeting us.

'It is,' said my father.

Dr Kafka stretched out his hand to me.

'You needn't be ashamed in front of me. I also have a large electricity bill.'

He laughed, and my shyness vanished.

'So this is the creator of the mysterious bug, Samsa,' I said to myself, disillusioned to see before me a simple, well-mannered man.

'There is too much noise in your poems,' said Franz Kafka,

when my father left us alone in the office. 'It is a by-product of youth, which indicates an excess of vitality. So that the noise is itself beautiful, though it has nothing in common with art. On the contrary! The noise mars the expression. But I am no critic, I cannot quickly transform myself into something different, then return to myself and precisely measure the distance. As I said — I am no critic. I am only a man under judgement and a spectator.'

'And the judge?' I asked.

He gave an embarrassed smile.

'Indeed, I am also the usher of the court, yet I do not know the judge. Probably I am quite a humble assistant-usher. I have no definite post.' Kafka laughed.

I laughed with him, though I did not understand him.

'The only definite thing is suffering,' he said earnestly. 'When do you write?'

I was surprised by the question, so I answered quickly:

'In the evening, at night. During the day very rarely. I cannot write during the day.'

'The day is a great enchantment.'

'I am disturbed by the light, the factory, the houses, the windows over the way. Most of all by the light. The light distracts my attention.'

'Perhaps it distracts it from the darkness within. It is good when the light overpowers one. If it were not for these horrible sleepless nights, I would never write at all. But they always recall me again to my own dark solitude.'

'Is he not himself the unfortunate bug in *The Metamorphosis*?' I thought.

I was glad when the door opened and my father came in.

* * *

Kafka had great grey eyes, under thick dark eyebrows. His brown face is very animated. Kafka speaks with his face.

Whenever he can substitute for words a movement of his facial muscles, he does so. A smile, contraction of his eyebrows, wrinkling of the narrow forehead, protrusion or pursing of the lips – such movements are a substitute for spoken sentences. Franz Kafka loves gestures, and is therefore economical of them. A gesture of his is not an accompaniment of speech, duplicating the words, but as it were a word from an independent language of movement, a means of communication, thus in no way an involuntary reflex, but a deliberate expression of intention. Folding of the hands, laying of outstretched palms on the surface of his desk, leaning his body back comfortably and yet tensely in his chair, bending his head forward in conjunction with a shrug of the shoulders, pressing his hand to his heart, these are a few of the sparingly used means of expression which he always accompanies with an apologetic smile, as if to say, 'It is true, and I admit, that I am playing a game: yet I hope that my game pleases you. And after all – after all, I only do it to win your understanding for a short while.'

'Doktor Kafka is very fond of you,' I said to my father. 'How did you come to know each other?'

'We know each other through the office,' answered my father. 'We first came to know each other better after my sketch for the card-index cabinet. Doktor Kafka was very pleased with the model which I made. We began talking, and he told me that in the afternoon after office hours he took lessons from the carpenter Kornhauser in the Poděbradgasse in Karolinenthal. From then on we often talked about personal matters. Then I gave him your poems, and so we became – close acquaintances.'

'Why not friends?'

My father shook his head.

'He is too shy and too reserved for friendship.'

* * *

On my next visit to Kafka I inquired:

'Do you still go to the carpenter in Karolinenthal?'

'You know about that?'

'My father told me.'

'No, I have not been for a long time. My health does not permit it any more. His Majesty the Body.'

'I can quite understand. Working in a dusty workshop is not very pleasant.'

'There you are wrong. I love to work in workshops. The smell of wood shavings, the humming of saws, the hammer-blows, all enchanted me. The afternoon went so quickly. I was always astonished when the evening came.'

'You must certainly have been tired.'

'Tired, but happy. There is nothing more beautiful than some straightforward, concrete, generally useful trade. Apart from carpentry, I have also worked at farming and gardening. It was all much better and worth more than forced labour in the office. There one appears to be something superior, better; but it is only appearance. In reality one is only lonelier and therefore unhappier. That is all. Intellectual labour tears a man out of human society. A craft, on the other hand, leads him towards men. What a pity I can no longer work in the workshop or in the garden.'

'But you would not wish to give up your post?'

'Why not? I have dreamed of going as a farm labourer or an artisan to Palestine.'

'You would leave everything here behind?'

'Everything, if I could make a life that had meaning, stability, and beauty. Do you know the writer Paul Adler?'

'I only know his book *The Magic Flute*.'

'He is in Prague. With his wife and the children.'

'What is his profession?'

'He has none. He has no profession, only a vocation. He travels with his wife and the children from one friend to another. A free

man, and a poet. In his presence I always have pangs of conscience, because I allow my life to be frittered away in an office.'

* * *

In May 1921 I wrote a sonnet which was published by Ludwig Winder in the Sunday supplement of the *Bohemia*.

Kafka said on this occasion:

'You describe the poet as a great and wonderful man whose feet are on the ground, while his head disappears in the clouds. Of course, that is a perfectly ordinary image drawn within the intellectual framework of lower-middle-class convention. It is an illusion based on wish fulfilment, which has nothing in common with reality. In fact, the poet is always much smaller and weaker than the social average. Therefore he feels the burden of earthly existence much more intensely and strongly than other men. For him personally his song is only a scream. Art for the artist is only suffering, through which he releases himself for further suffering. He is not a giant, but only a more or less brightly plumaged bird in the cage of his existence.'

'You too?' I asked.

'I am a quite impossible bird,' said Franz Kafka. 'I am a jackdaw – a *kavka*. The coal merchant in the close of the Tein cathedral has one. Have you seen it?'

'Yes, it flies about outside his shop.'

'Yes, my relative is better off than I am. It is true, of course, that its wings have been clipped. As for me, this was not in any case necessary, as my wings are atrophied. For this reason there are no heights and distances for me. I hop about bewildered among my fellow men. They regard me with deep suspicion. And indeed I am a dangerous bird, a thief, a jackdaw. But that is only an illusion. In fact, I lack all feeling for shining objects. For that reason I do not even have glossy black plumage. I am grey, like ash. A jackdaw who longs to disappear between the stones. But this is only

joking, so that you will not notice how badly things are going with me today.'

I no longer remember how often I visited Franz Kafka in his office. One thing, however, I remember very distinctly: his physical appearance as I – half an hour before the end of office hours – opened the door on the second floor of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution.

He sat behind his desk, his head leaning back, legs outstretched, his hands resting on the desk. Filla's picture, *A Reader of Dostoevsky*, has something of the attitude he assumed. From this point of view, there was a great resemblance between Filla's picture and Kafka's bodily appearance. Yet it was purely external. Behind the outward likeness lay a great inner difference.

Filla's reader was overpowered by something, while Kafka's attitude expressed a voluntary and therefore triumphant surrender. On the thin lips played a delicate smile, which was much more the reflection of some distant alien joy than an expression of his own happiness. The eyes always looked at people a little from below upwards. Franz Kafka thus had a singular appearance, as if apologizing for being so slender and tall. His entire figure seemed to say, 'I am, forgive me, quite unimportant. You do me a great pleasure, if you overlook me.'

His voice was a hesitating, muted baritone, wonderfully melodious, although it never left the middle range in strength and pitch. Voice, gesture, look, all radiated the peace of understanding and goodness.

He spoke both Czech and German. But more German. And his German had a hard accent, like that of the German spoken by the Czechs. Yet the likeness is only a faint and inexact one; in fact, they were quite different.

The Czech accent of the German which I am thinking of is harsh. The language sounds as if hacked to pieces. Kafka's speech never made this impression. It seemed angular because of the inner tension: every word a stone. The hardness of his speech was caused

by the effort at exactness and precision. It was thus determined by positive personal qualities and not by group characteristics. His speech resembled his hands.

He had large, strong hands, broad palms, thin, fine fingers with flat, spatulate finger-nails and prominent yet very delicate bones and knuckles.

When I remember Kafka's voice, his smile and his hands, I always think of a remark of my father's.

He said, 'Strength combined with scrupulous delicacy: strength, which finds the small things the most difficult'.

* * *

About three weeks after my first meeting with Franz Kafka, I went for my first walk with him.

In the office he told me to wait for him at four o'clock at the Hus Memorial on the Altstädter Ring, and he would return to me an exercise-book of poems which I had lent him.

I was at the appointed place at the appointed time, but Franz Kafka was nearly an hour late.

He apologized, 'I can never keep an appointment punctually. I am always too late. I am determined to be on time, I have the good and upright intention of keeping the appointment as agreed, but circumstances or my body always destroy this intention, in order to prove to me my own weakness. Probably that is the root of my illness.'

We walked along the Altstädter Ring.

Kafka said that it might be possible to publish some of my poems. He wished to give them to Otto Pick.

'I have already discussed them with him,' he said.

I begged him not to publish the poems.

Kafka stood still.

'So you do not write in order to publish?'

'No. My poems are only an attempt, a very modest attempt, to prove to myself that I am not altogether stupid.'

We continued our walk. Franz Kafka showed me his parents' warehouse and house.

'So you are rich,' I said.

Franz Kafka pursed his mouth.

'What are riches? For someone an old shirt is riches. Others are poor on ten millions. Wealth is something completely relative and unsatisfying. Fundamentally, it is only a special situation. Wealth implies dependence on things which one possesses and which have to be safeguarded from dwindling away by new possessions and a further dependence. It is merely materialized insecurity. But – all that belongs to my parents, not me.'

My first walk with Franz Kafka ended in the following way:

Our circuit of the Ring had brought us back to the Kinsky Palace, when from out of the warehouse, with the business sign HERMANN KAFKA, emerged a tall, broad man in a dark overcoat and a shining hat. He remained standing about five steps away from us and waited.

As we came three paces nearer, the man said, very loudly:

'Franz. Go home. The air is damp.'

Kafka said, in a strangely gentle voice:

'My father. He is anxious about me. Love often wears the face of violence. Come and see me.'

I bowed. Franz Kafka departed, without shaking hands.

* * *

I had called on Franz Kafka in his office at the very moment when a proof copy of his story, *In a Penal Colony*, arrived by post. Kafka opened the grey wrapper, without knowing what it contained. But when he opened the green-and-black bound volume and recognized his work, he was obviously embarrassed.

He opened the drawer of his desk, looked at me, closed the drawer, and handed me the book.

'You will certainly want to see the book.'

I answered with a smile, opened the volume, gave a hurried look at the printing and paper and gave him the book back, as I realized his nervousness.

'It is beautifully done,' I said. 'A really representative Drugulin Press production. You should be very satisfied, Herr Doktor.'

'That I really am not,' said Franz Kafka, and pushed the book carelessly into a drawer, which he closed. 'Publication of some scribble of mine always upsets me.'

'Then why do you allow it to be printed?'

'That's just it! Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, all my friends always take possession of something I have written and then take me by surprise with a completed contract with the publisher. I do not want to cause them any unpleasantness, and so it all ends in the publication of things which are entirely personal notes or diversions. Personal proofs of my human weakness are printed, and even sold, because my friends, with Max Brod at their head, have conceived the idea of making literature out of them, and because I have not the strength to destroy this evidence of solitude.'

After a short pause he said in a different voice:

'What I have just said is, of course, an exaggeration, and a piece of malice against my friends. In fact, I am so corrupt and shameless that I myself co-operate in publishing these things. As an excuse for my own weakness, I make circumstances stronger than they really are. That, of course, is a piece of deceit. But after all, I am a lawyer. So I can never get away from evil.'

* * *

Franz Kafka was fascinated by the young. His story, *The Stoker*, is filled with tenderness and sympathy. I told him this as we were

discussing the Czech translation by Milena Jesenská, which had appeared in the literary review *Kmen* (*The Stem*).

'There is so much sunshine and high spirits in your story. So much love – though it is never mentioned.'

'They are not in the story, but in the subject of the story – youth,' said Franz Kafka gravely. 'Youth is full of sunshine and love. Youth is happy, because it has the ability to see beauty. When this ability is lost, wretched old age begins, decay, unhappiness.'

'So age excludes the possibility of happiness?'

'No, happiness excludes age.' Smiling, he bent his head forward, as if to hide it between his hunched shoulders. 'Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old.'

His smile, his attitude, his voice, reminded one of a quiet and serene boy.

'Then in *The Stoker* you are very young and happy.'

I had hardly finished the sentence than his expression darkened.

'*The Stoker* is very good,' I hastened to add, but Franz Kafka's dark-grey eyes were filled with grief.

'One speaks best about what is strange to one. One sees it most clearly. *The Stoker* is the remembrance of a dream, of something that perhaps never really existed. Karl Rossmann is not a Jew. But we Jews are born old.'

* * *

On another occasion, when I told Doktor Kafka of a case of juvenile crime, we again discussed his story *The Stoker*.

I asked whether the character of the sixteen-year-old Karl Rossmann had been drawn from life.

Franz Kafka said, 'I had many models, and none. But all that is in the past.'

'The character of the young Rossmann, and that of the stoker, are so full of life,' I said.

Kafka's expression darkened.

'That is only a by-product. I was not describing people. I was telling a story. They are images, only images.'

'Then there must have been a model. The condition of an image is vision.'

Kafka smiled.

'One photographs things in order to get them out of one's mind. My stories are a kind of closing one's eyes.'

* * *

Conversations about his books were always very brief.

'I have been reading *The Verdict*.'

'Did you like it?'

'Like it? The book is horrifying!'

'You are perfectly right.'

'I should like to know how you came to write it. The dedication, *For F.*, is certainly not merely formal. Surely you wanted the book to say something to someone. I should like to know the context.'

Kafka smiled, embarrassed.

'I am being impertinent. Forgive me.'

'You mustn't apologize. One reads in order to ask questions. *The Verdict* is the spectre of a night.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is a spectre,' he repeated, with a hard look into the distance.

'And yet you wrote it.'

'That is merely the verification, and so the complete exorcism, of the spectre.'

* * *

My friend Alfred Kampf from Altsattel near Falkenau, whose acquaintance I had made in Elbogen, admired Kafka's story *The Meta-*

morphosis. He described the author as 'a new, more profound and therefore more significant Edgar Allan Poe'.

During a walk with Franz Kafka on the Altstädter Ring I told him about this new admirer of his, but aroused neither interest nor understanding. On the contrary, Kafka's expression showed that any discussion of his book was distasteful to him. I, however, was filled with a zeal for discoveries, and so I was tactless.

'The hero of the story is called Samsa,' I said. 'It sounds like a cryptogram for Kafka. Five letters in each word. The S in the word Samsa has the same position as the K in the word Kafka. The A...'

Kafka interrupted me.

'It is not a cryptogram. Samsa is not merely Kafka, and nothing else. *The Metamorphosis* is not a confession, although it is – in a certain sense – an indiscretion.'

'I know nothing about that.'

'Is it perhaps delicate and discreet to talk about the bugs in one's own family?'

'It isn't usual in good society.'

'You see what bad manners I have.'

Kafka smiled. He wished to dismiss the subject. But I did not wish to.

'It seems to me that the distinction between good and bad manners hardly applies here,' I said. '*The Metamorphosis* is a terrible dream, a terrible conception.'

Kafka stood still.

'The dream reveals the reality, which conception lags behind. That is the horror of life – the terror of art. But now I must go home.'

He took a curt farewell.

Had I driven him away?

I felt ashamed.

* * *

We did not see each other for a fortnight. I told him about the books which in the meanwhile I had 'devoured'. Kafka smiled.

'From life one can extract comparatively so many books, but from books so little, so very little, life.'

'So literature is a bad preservative?'

He laughed and nodded.

* * *

I surprised Franz Kafka in his office studying a catalogue of the *Reclam-Bücherei*.

'I am getting drunk on book titles', said Kafka. 'Books are a narcotic.'

I opened my brief-case and showed him the contents.

'I am a hashish addict, Herr Doktor.'

Kafka was amazed.

'Nothing but new books!'

I emptied the brief-case on to his writing-desk. Kafka took one book after the other, turned the pages, read a passage here and there, and returned me the book.

'And you are going to read all that?'

I nodded.

Kafka pursed his lips.

'You spend too much time on ephemerals. The majority of modern books are merely wavering reflections of the present. They disappear very quickly. You should read more old books. The classics. Goethe. What is old reveals its deepest value - lastingness. What is merely new is the most transitory of all things. It is beautiful today, and tomorrow merely ludicrous. That is the way of literature.'

'And poetry?'

'Poetry transforms life. Sometimes that is even worse.'

A knock at the door. Enter my father.

'Is my son and heir being a nuisance?'

Kafka smiled.

'Oh, no! We are discussing devils and demons.'

* * *

Kafka noticed my lack of sleep. Quite truthfully I told him:

'I was so full of things that I wrote until the morning.' Kafka laid his large hands, as if carved out of wood, on the table top and said slowly:

'That is a great happiness, to be able to expose one's inner feelings so easily.'

'It was as if I were drunk. I have not yet read what exactly I wrote.'

'Of course. What is written is merely the dregs of the experience.'

* * *

My friend Ernst Lederer wrote poems in especially bright blue ink on engraved sheets of hand-made paper.

I told Kafka about it.

He said, 'That is quite right. Every magician has his own rites. Haydn for example only composed in a ceremonially powdered wig. Writing is, after all, a kind of invocation of spirits.'

* * *

Franz Kafka asked me several times to show him some of my 'unrhymed scribbles' – as I myself described them. I therefore looked through my notebook for suitable extracts, which I put together as a collection of short prose pieces, gave it the title *The Moment of the Abyss*, and presented it to Kafka.

He only gave me back the manuscript after several months, when he was preparing to travel to the sanatorium at Tatranské Matlyary.

As he did so, he said:

'All your stories are so touchingly young. You say far more about the impressions which things inspire in you than about the things and objects themselves. That is lyrical poetry. You caress the world, instead of grasping it.'

'So my writing is worthless?'

Kafka grasped my hand.

'I did not say that. Certainly these little stories have a value for you. Every written word is a personal document. But art...'

'Art is different,' I continued bitterly.

'Your writing is not yet art,' said Kafka firmly. 'This description of feelings and impressions is most of all a hesitant groping for the world. The eyes are still heavy with dreams. But in time that will cease and then perhaps the outstretched groping hand will withdraw as if caught by the fire. Perhaps you will cry out, stammer incoherently, or grind your teeth together and open your eyes wide, very wide. But — these are only words. Art is always a matter of the entire personality. For that reason it is fundamentally tragic.'

* * *

Franz Kafka showed me a questionnaire for an inquiry into literature which, I think, Otto Pick was carrying out for the literary Sunday supplement of the *Prager Presse*. He pointed with his index finger to the question, 'What can you say about your future literary plans?' and smiled.

'How stupid. One cannot possibly answer that.'

I looked at him without understanding.

'Can one foretell how one's heart will beat tomorrow? No, it is not possible. Yet the pen is only a seismographic pencil for the heart. It will register earthquakes, but not foretell them.'

* * *

I called on Doktor Kafka in his office. He was just about to go as I entered.

'You're going?'

'Only for a moment, two floors higher in your father's department. Sit down and wait for me. I shall not be long. In the meanwhile, perhaps, look at this new review. It came by post yesterday.'

It was the first number of a large, representative review appearing in Berlin. It was called *Marsyas*, and was edited by Theodore Tagger. Inside was a prospectus, in which, among notices of promised contributions, a work of Franz Werfel's, *Theoretical Prose*, was announced. He was a friend of Kafka's, so on his return to the office I asked him whether he knew anything about the announcement.

'Yes,' said Franz Kafka curtly. 'Werfel told Max it was an invention of the publisher's.'

'Can one do such things? After all, that is a lie.'

'It is literature,' said Doktor Kafka smiling. 'Flight from reality.'

'So poetry is lies?'

'No. Poetry is a condensate, an essence. Literature, on the other hand, is a relaxation, a means of pleasure which alleviates the unconscious life, a narcotic.'

'And poetry?'

'Poetry is exactly the opposite. Poetry is an awakening.'

'So poetry tends towards religion.'

'I would not say that. But certainly to prayer.'

* * *

I showed Franz Kafka the outline of a drama on a biblical theme.

'What will you do with it?' he asked.

'I don't know. The material attracts me, but the treatment ... To complete the outline now seems to me a kind of scissors-and-paste work.'

Kafka gave me the manuscript.

'You are right. Only what is born lives. Everything else is a waste of time: literature with no justification to existence.'

* * *

On the fourth page of the yellow fly leaves in my copy of the book *A Country Doctor*, there is the following note: 'Literature strives to present things in pleasing, attractive light. But the poet is forced to elevate things into the realm of truth, clarity, and permanence. Literature aims at comfort. But the poet is a seeker after happiness, and that is everything rather than comfortable.'

I do not know whether this is a record of some comment of Kafka's or my own recorded version of the gist of one of our conversations.

* * *

I greeted Kafka on his return from a short visit to his brother-in-law in the country.

'So now we are at home again.'

Kafka smiled sadly.

'At home? I live with my parents. That is all. It is true I have a small room of my own, but that is not a home, only a place of refuge, where I can hide my inner turmoil, only in order to fall all the more into its clutches.'

* * *

I told Kafka about the production of two one-act plays, very different in style, by Walter Hasenclever and Arthur Schnitzler, which I had seen in the New German Theatre.

'The programme was badly balanced,' I said, 'at the end of my account. "The expressionism of one play spoils the realism of the

other, and *vice versa*. Probably the production had not allowed enough time for study.'

'Quite possible,' said Kafka. 'The German theatre in Prague is in a very difficult position. Taken as whole, it forms a large complex of financial and human relationships, to which there is no correspondingly large public. It is a pyramid without a base. The actors are subordinate to the producers, who are controlled by the management, which is responsible to the committee of the theatre club. It is a chain which lacks the final link to hold it together. There is no genuine German community here, and therefore no dependable, permanent audience. The German-speaking Jews in the boxes and in the stalls are, after all, not Germans, and the German students who come to Prague and sit in the balcony and the gallery are merely the advance guard of an invading power – not spectators. In such conditions it is naturally impossible to achieve a serious work of art. Their energies are wasted on accidentals. What is left are efforts and exertions which scarcely ever end in a good production. So I never go to the theatre. It is too sad.'

* * *

In the German Theatre they were performing Walter Hasenclever's play *The Son*.

Franz Kafka said, 'The revolt of the son against the father is one of the primeval themes of literature, and an even older problem in the world. Dramas and tragedies are written about it, yet in reality it is material for comedy. The Irishman Synge was right in realizing this. In his play *The Playboy of the Western World* the son is an adolescent exhibitionist who boasts of having murdered his father. Then along comes the old man and turns the young conqueror of paternal authority into a figure of fun.'

'I see that you are very sceptical about the struggle of the young against the old,' I said.

Kafka smiled.

'My scepticism does not alter the fact that this struggle is usually only shadow boxing.'

'What do you mean – shadow boxing?'

'Age is the future of youth, which sooner or later it must reach. So why struggle? To become old sooner? For a quicker departure?'

The entry of an official interrupted our conversation.

* * *

In the German Theatre the actor Rudolf Schildkraut from the Hoftheater in Vienna was giving a guest performance in Sholem Asch's play, *The God of Vengeance*. We talked about it to Kafka.

'Rudolf Schildkraut is recognized as a great actor,' said Franz Kafka. 'But is he a great Jewish actor? In my opinion this is doubtful. Schildkraut acts Jewish parts in Jewish plays. But since he does not act exclusively in Jewish for Jews, but in German for everyone, he is not an expressly Jewish actor. He is a borderline case, an intermediary, who gives people an insight into the intimacy of Jewish life. He enlarges the horizons of non-Jews, without illuminating the existence of the Jews themselves. This is only done by the poor Jewish actors who act for Jews in Jewish. By their art they sweep away the deposits of an alien world from the life of the Jews, display in the bright light of day the hidden Jewish face which is sinking into oblivion, and so give them an anchor in the troubles of our time.'

I told him how at the end of the war I had seen two performances by travelling Jewish actors in the little café Savoy on the Geisplatz. Kafka was extremely astonished.

'How did you come to be there?'

'With my mother. She lived for a long time in Poland.'

'And what did you think of the theatre?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'I only remember that I hardly understood the language. The performance was in dialect. But my mother admired the actors.'

Kafka looked into the distance.

'I used to know the Jewish actors in the Savoy café. That was about ten years ago. I also had difficulties with the language. Then I discovered that I understood more Yiddish than I had imagined.'

'My mother spoke fluent Yiddish,' I said proudly. I told him how as a six-year-old child I had been with my mother in the Schwarzgasse in the Jewish quarter of Przemyśl. And how out of the ancient houses and the dark little shops men and women ran out and kissed my mother's hand and the hem of her coat, laughed and cried and shouted, 'Our good lady! Our good lady!' I learned later that my mother had hidden many Jews in her house during the pogroms.

Franz Kafka said, when I had finished recounting these memories:

'And I should like to run to those poor Jews of the Ghetto, kiss the hem of their coats, and say not a word. I should be completely happy if only they would endure my presence in silence.'

'Are you so lonely?' I asked.

Kafka nodded.

'Like Kaspar Hauser?' I said.

Kafka laughed.

'Much worse than Kaspar Hauser. I am as lonely as – as Franz Kafka.'

* * *

While walking on the Altstädter Ring we discussed Max Brod's play, *The Forger*. I explained to Kafka my ideas about its production. In our discussion we came to the point in the play where the entry of a woman changes the whole situation. My idea was that the characters on the stage should fall back slowly as she entered, but Kafka did not agree.

'They must all fall back as if struck by lightning,' he said.

'That would be too theatrical,' I objected.

But Franz Kafka shook his head.

'So it should be. Actors ought to be theatrical. To create the desired effect their emotions and actions must be larger than the feelings and actions of their audience. If the theatre is to affect life, it must be stronger, more intense than ordinary life. That is the law of gravity. In shooting one must aim higher than the mark.'

* * *

The Prague Ständetheater was performing the revolutionary play, *Tanja*, by Ernst Weiss, who was one of Max Brod's circle of friends. When I told Kafka about the performance, which I had seen, he said:

'The finest scene is the dream scene with Tanja's child. The theatre makes its strongest effect, when it makes unreal things real. Then the stage becomes a periscope for the soul, illuminating reality from within.'

* * *

I took with me to the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution a book, *The Two-headed Nymph*, by Kasimir Edschmid, who in one chapter, *Theodor Daubler and the Abstract School*, discussed Franz Kafka.

'Have you seen this?' I asked.

Franz Kafka nodded.

'My attention was drawn to it.'

'And what do you think of it, Herr Doktor?'

Franz Kafka shrugged his shoulders and made a helpless gesture with his right hand.

'Edschmid speaks of me as if I were an engineer. Whereas I am only a very mediocre, clumsy draughtsman. He claims that I introduce miracles into ordinary events. That is, of course, a serious error on his part. The ordinary is itself a miracle! All I do is to re-

cord it. Possibly, I also illuminate matters a little, like the lighting on a half-dark stage. And yet that is not true! In fact, the stage is not dark at all. It is filled with daylight. Therefore men close their eyes, and see so little.'

'There is often a painful difference between perception and reality,' I said.

Kafka nodded.

'All is struggle, effort. Only those deserve love and life who have to conquer them each day.'

There was a short pause. Then he added softly with an ironical smile:

'Says Goethe.'

'Johann Wolfgang von Goethe?'

A quick nod.

'Goethe says practically everything that matters to us human beings.'

'My friend Alfred Kampf told me that Oswald Spengler had taken the doctrine of *The Decline of the West* from Goethe's *Faust*.'

'That is perfectly possible,' said Franz Kafka. 'Many so-called scientists transfer the world of the poet to another, scientific, plane, and so achieve fame and importance.'

* * *

I was with Kafka in his office. I had with me Christian Morgenstern's *Songs of the Gallows*.

'Do you know his serious poems?' Kafka asked me. '*Time and Eternity? Steps?*'

'No, I had no idea that he wrote serious poems.'

'Morgenstern is a terribly serious poet. His poems are so serious that in *Songs of the Gallows* he has to save himself from his own in-human seriousness.'

* * *

The German poet from Prague, Johannes Urzidil, collected and published the poems of his dead, scarcely twenty-year-old friend. I asked Franz Kafka whether he had known the dead friend. I no longer remember his reply, except for his final words.

‘He was one of those unhappy young men who had lost himself among the centenarian Jews of the cafés; and died. What else could he do? In our time the cafés are the catacombs of the Jews. Without light and without love. Not everyone can bear that.’

* * *

I first came across the name of the mysterious foundling, Kaspar Hauser, who appeared in Nuremberg in the year 1828, in the poems of Georg Trakl. Later Lydia Holzner lent me Jacob Wassermann’s long novel, *Caspar Hauser or The Sluggish Heart*.

On that occasion Franz Kafka remarked:

‘Wassermann’s Caspar Hauser has long ceased to be a foundling. He is now legitimized, settled in the world, registered with the police, a tax-payer. Moreover, he has abandoned his old name. He is now called Jacob Wassermann, German novelist and householder. In secret he also suffers from sluggishness of heart, which gives him pangs of conscience. But he works it up into well-paid prose, and so all is for the best.’

* * *

My father loved Altenberg’s poems in prose. Whenever he found one of these little sketches in the newspaper, he cut it out and preserved the cutting carefully in a special folder.

When I told Franz Kafka this, he smiled, leaned forward, pressed his clasped hands between his knees, and said very softly:

‘That is beautiful. That is very beautiful. I have always liked your father so much. At first sight he seems so cold and prosaic. One thinks he is merely an industrious and able official. Yet when one knows him better, one discovers under his deceptive appearance a

living spring of warm humanity. Your father—in spite of his knowledge — has a lively creative fantasy. And so he loves poetry. For Peter Altenberg is really a poet. His little anecdotes reflect his entire life. And every step, every gesture he makes guarantees the veracity of his words. Peter Altenberg is a genius of trivialities, a strange idealist, who discovers the beauties of the world like cigarette-ends in the ashtrays of cafés.’

* * *

Directly after the first world war the most successful German novel was Gustav Meyrink’s *The Golem*. Franz Kafka gave me his opinion of the book.

‘The atmosphere of the old Jewish quarter of Prague is wonderfully reproduced.’

‘Do you still remember the old Jewish quarter?’¹

‘As a matter of fact, I came when it had already disappeared. But...’

Kafka made a gesture with his left hand, as if to say, ‘What good did it do?’ His smile replied, ‘None.’

Then he continued, ‘In us all it still lives — the dark corners, the secret alleys, shuttered windows, squalid courtyards, rowdy pubs, and sinister inns. We walk through the broad streets of the newly built town. But our steps and our glances are uncertain. Inside we tremble just as before in the ancient streets of our misery. Our heart knows nothing of the slum clearance which has been achieved. The unhealthy old Jewish town within us is far more real than the new hygienic town around us. With our eyes open we walk through a dream: ourselves only a ghost of a vanished age.’

* * *

¹ The old Jewish quarter, situated in that part of Prague still known as the Judenstadt or Josefstadt, was largely destroyed and rebuilt at the end of the last century. It was the home of the Jews from the date of their first settlement in Prague, and had a synagogue as early as 1124. It was separated from the city by nine gates, which at night were closed.

In a second-hand bookshop I found a Czech translation of Leon Bloy's book, *The Blood of the Poor*.

Franz Kafka was extremely interested in my discovery. He said:

'I know a book of Leon Bloy's against anti-semitism, *Salvation through the Jews*. In it a Christian takes the Jews – like poor relations – under his protection. It is extremely interesting. And then – Bloy can curse. That is something quite extraordinary. Bloy has a fire which reminds one of the fervour of the prophets. What am I saying; Bloy is much better at cursing. That is easily understandable, because his fire is nourished by all the filth of modern times.'

* * *

Franz Kafka gave me a short essay on Søren Kierkegaard by Carl Dallago. He said on this occasion:

'Kierkegaard faces the problem, whether to enjoy life aesthetically or to experience it ethically. But this seems to me a false statement of the problem. The Either-Or exists only in the head of Søren Kierkegaard. In reality one can only achieve an aesthetic enjoyment of life as a result of humble ethical experience. But this is only a personal opinion of the moment, which perhaps I shall abandon after closer inquiry.'

* * *

Sometimes with Franz Kafka I met Hans Klaus, whom I had already met at school, but until then had not known well, because he was several years older than me. In addition, he was already well known as the author of a number of poems and stories. Compared with him I was merely an immature little schoolboy. Yet it seemed to me that Franz Kafka talked to me more as a friend than to Klaus. I was pleased by this, and at the same time ashamed of myself.

'Are you only a child to Doktor Kafka?' I asked myself, and

immediately reassured myself: 'You probably only imagine that he is more friendly to you than to Klaus.'

I had no peace. So one day I turned to Kafka as I accompanied him from the office along the Altstädter Ring.

'What do you think, Herr Doktor – am I vain?'

Kafka was astonished.

'What made you think of such a question?'

'It seems to me that you are more friendly to me than to Klaus. That makes me happy. It makes me very happy. At the same time I tell myself that these are merely the whispers of vanity.'

Kafka took me by the arm.

'You are a child.'

My chin began to tremble.

'Look, Herr Doktor, I always think that you are so good to me only because I am still a foolish, immature child.'

'For me you are a young man,' said Franz Kafka. 'You have future possibilities which others have already lost. People mean so much to you that you have to watch yourself very closely, in order not to lose yourself. Certainly I am more friendly to you than to Klaus. After all, I speak to my own past when I speak to you. One cannot help being friendly. And then; you are younger than Klaus, and so you need more understanding and love.'

* * *

From that day on my relations with Klaus altered. We became fast friends. He introduced me to his literary companions, the doctor Rudolf Altschul and the architect Konstantin Ahne, who published poems under the name of Hans Tine Kanton.

We called on each other, went together to the theatre, made excursions, lent each other books, debated with each other and – admired each other.

Thus a group called *Protest* was founded, which arranged an evening of readings of its own works in the Mozarteum.

We wished to give the audience something by Franz Kafka; but he had strongly forbidden it.

'You must be mad!' he said to me. 'A protest which is licensed and approved by the police! It is both absurd and sad. It is worse than real revolt, because it is only a sham outburst. But I in any case am no protestant. I wish to accept everything and bear it patiently, but I will not accept a public exhibition of this kind.'

I hastened to explain that I had nothing in common with Altschul, Klaus, and Ahne. The trio disbanded. Kafka meant more to me than my own vanity.

* * *

When, some months later, Hans Klaus and I quarrelled, I told Kafka, who listened quietly, then shrugged his shoulders and said:

'Now you would like to have some advice from me. But I am not a good adviser. All advice seems to me to be at bottom a betrayal.¹ It is a cowardly retreat in face of the future, which is the touchstone of our present. But only those fear to be put to the proof who have a bad conscience. They are the ones who do not fulfil the tasks of the present. Yet who knows precisely what his task is? No one. So that every one of us has a bad conscience, which he tries to escape by going to sleep as quickly as possible.'

I remarked that Johannes R. Becher in one of his poems describes sleep as a friendly visitation by death.

Kafka nodded.

'That is true. Perhaps my insomnia is only a kind of fear of the visitor whom I must pay for my life.'

* * *

¹ There is here an untranslatable play upon the words *Rat* (advice) and *Verrat* (betrayal).

The poet Hans Klaus gave me a little book: *Tubutsch*, by Albert Ehrenstein, with twelve drawings by Oskar Kokoschka. Kafka saw the book, I lent it to him, and he returned it to me on my next visit to his office.

'Such a small book and so much noise,' he remarked. '*Mankind Shrieks*. Do you know it?'

'No.'

'It is – I think – the title of a book of poems by Albert Ehrenstein.'

'So you know him well?'

'Well?' said Kafka, and shrugged his shoulders in denial. 'One never knows the living. The present is change and transformation. Albert Ehrenstein is one of today's generation. He is a child lost and crying in the night.'

'What do you think of Kokoschka's drawings?'

'I do not understand them. Drawing derives from to draw, to describe, to show. All they show me is the painter's internal confusion and disorder.'

'I saw his large picture of Prague at the Expressionist exhibition in the Rudolfinum.'

Kafka turned his left hand, which was lying on the table, palm upwards.

'The big one – with the green cupola of the Niklaskirche in the centre?'

'Yes, that is the one.'

He bowed his head.

'In that picture the roofs are flying away. The cupolas are umbrellas in the wind. The whole city is flying in all directions. Yet Prague still stands – despite all internal conflicts. That is the miracle.'

* * *

I had set to music two poems from Johannes Schlaf's collection, *Spring*. I sent a copy to the author of the words. Johannes Schlaf

thanked me in a long handwritten letter which I showed to Franz Kafka.

He laughed, as he gave me the letter back across the writing-table.

'Schlaf is so touching. We visited him when we were in Werimar with Max Brod. He would not mention literature or art. All his attention was concentrated on overthrowing the existing solar system.'

'Not long ago I saw a long book by Schlaf in which he claimed that the centre of the earth was the centre of the cosmos.'

'Yes, that was his idea even then, and he tried to convince us of its truth by means of his own special theory of sun spots. He took us to the window of his modest dwelling and showed us the sun with the assistance of a schoolboy's antiquated telescope.'

'You must have laughed.'

'Why? The fact that he dared to do battle with science and the cosmos armed with this ridiculous object inherited from ancient times was so absurd and so affecting at the same time that we almost believed him.'

'What prevented you?'

'As a matter of a fact, the coffee. It was bad. We had to leave.'

* * *

I repeated Reimann's amusing story about Kurt Wolff, the Leipzig publisher, who at eight o'clock in the morning rejected a translation of Rabindranath Tagore, and two hours later sent the firm's reader to the central post office to reclaim the rejected manuscript, because in the meanwhile he had seen in the paper that Tagore had won the Nobel Prize.

'Odd that he should have refused Tagore,' said Franz Kafka slowly. 'Tagore is after all not very different from Kurt Wolff. India and Leipzig, the distance between is only apparent. In reality Tagore is only a German in disguise.'

'A schoolmaster, perhaps?'

'A schoolmaster?' repeated Kafka gravely, drew down the corners of his tight-pressed lips, and slowly shook his head. 'No, not that, but he could be a Saxon – like Richard Wagner.'

'Mysticism in Tyrolean dress?'

'Something like that.'

We laughed.

* * *

I lent Kafka a German translation of the Indian religious text, the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Kafka said, 'Indian religious writings attract and repel me at the same time. Like a poison, there is something both seductive and horrible in them. All these Yogis and sorcerers rule over the life of nature not because of their burning love of freedom but because of a concealed and icy hatred of life. The source of Indian religious devotions is a bottomless pessimism.'

I recalled Schopenhauer's interest in Indian religious philosophy.

Kafka said, 'Schopenhauer is an artist in language. That is the source of his thinking. For the language alone, one must not fail to read him.'

* * *

Franz Kafka laughed, when he saw me with a little book of poems by Michael Mareš.

'I know him,' he said. 'He is a fierce anarchist whom they endure as a curiosity in the *Prager Tagblatt*.'

'You don't take the Czech anarchists seriously?'

Kafka smiled apologetically.

'That is very hard. These people, who call themselves anarchists, are so nice and friendly, that one has to believe every word they say. At the same time – and by reason of the same qualities – one

cannot believe that they are really such world destroyers as they claim.'

'So you know them personally?'

'A little. They are very nice, jolly people.'

* * *

I brought Kafka a new issue of *Die Fackel*, published by Karl Kraus in Vienna.

'He is marvellous at tearing the journalists to pieces,' he said as he turned the leaves. 'Only a converted poacher could be such a strict keeper.'

'Karl Kraus exposes Georg Kulka, who adapts plays for the Vienna Burgtheater, as a plagiarist. What do you think of that?'

'That is nothing. Just a little failure of the brain tracts, that's all.'

* * *

We discussed the short, brilliantly written essays by Alfred Polgar which often appeared in the *Prager Tagblatt*.

Kafka said, 'His sentences are so polished and pleasing that one looks on the reading of Alfred Polgar as a welcome social diversion and hardly notices that one is being influenced and educated. The velvet glove of the form conceals the strong intrepid will which is the content. Polgar is a minor but effective Maccabee in the land of the Philistines.'

* * *

Franz Kafka said as he returned a book of poems by Francis Jammes:

'He is so touchingly simple, so happy and strong. For him, his life is not an event between two nights. He knows nothing of dark-

ness. He and his whole world nestle safely in God's almighty hand. Like a child, he lisps to the good God as to any member of the family. And so he does not grow old.'

* * *

Lydia Holzner gave me a Chinese novel, *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun*, by Alfred Döblin. I showed it to Franz Kafka, who said:

'He has a great name among the modern German novelists. Apart from this book, his first, I only know some short stories and a strange novel about love, *The Black Curtain*. Döblin makes on me the impression that he looks on the external world as something quite incomplete, to which he must give the final creative touches by his writing. That is only my impression. But if you read him attentively, you will soon notice the same thing.'

* * *

Because of Kafka's comments, I read Alfred Döblin's first novel, *The Black Curtain, a novel of words and accidents*.

When I spoke to him about it, he said:

'I do not understand the book. Accident is the name one gives to the coincidence of events, of which one does not know the causation. But there is no world without causation. Therefore in the world there are no accidents, but only here ...' Kafka touched his forehead with his left hand. 'Accidents only exist in our heads, in our limited perceptions. They are the reflection of the limits of our knowledge. The struggle against chance is always a struggle against ourselves, which we can never entirely win. But the book says nothing of all this.'

'So you are disappointed in Döblin?'

'As a matter of fact, I am only disappointed in myself. I expected from him something different from what he perhaps wished to give. But the stubbornness of my expectation blinded me so that I

skipped pages and sentences and finally the whole book. So I can say nothing about the book. I am a very bad reader.'

* * *

Franz Kafka saw me with a book of Alfred Döblin's, *Murder of a Buttercup*.

He said, 'How strange it sounds, when one takes a perfectly ordinary idea from the world of a carnivorous culture and couples it with some frail botanical name.'

* * *

In three successive Sunday editions, the *Prager Presse* published an article, *The Great Literary Bestiary*, by Franz Blei. The author described a widely assorted number of writers and poets in the shape of fishes, birds, moles, hares, and so on. He said of Kafka amongst other things that he was a peculiar bird which fed on bitter roots.

I questioned Kafka about Franz Blei.

'He has been an old and close friend of Max Brod's for many years,' he said smiling. 'Blei is enormously clever and witty. He is always so amusing when we meet. World literature parades past our table in its underpants. Franz Blei is much cleverer, and greater, than what he writes. That is natural, because his writing is only recorded conversation. The path from the head to the pen is much longer and harder than from the head to the tongue. Much is lost on the way. Franz Blei is an oriental story-teller who has lost his way to Germany.'

* * *

Seeing me with a book of poems by Johannes R. Becher, he remarked:

'I do not understand these poems. They are so filled with noise

and verbal uproar, that one cannot get away from oneself. Instead of bridges, the words form high unscalable walls. One is continually offended by the form, so that one can never penetrate to the content. The words never condense into language. They are a shriek and nothing more.'

* * *

I was given two books by G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* and *The Man who was Thursday*.

Kafka said, 'He is so gay, that one might almost believe he had found God.'

'So for you laughter is a sign of religious feeling?'

'Not always. But in such a godless time one must be gay. It is a duty. The ship's orchestra played to the end on the sinking *Titanic*. In that way one saps the foundations of despair.'

'Yet a forced gaiety is much sadder than an openly acknowledged sorrow.'

'Quite true. Yet sorrow has no prospects. And all that matters is prospects, hope, going forward. There is danger only in the narrow, restricted moment. Behind it lies the abyss. If one overcomes it, everything is different. Only the moment counts. It determines life.'

* * *

We spoke about Baudelaire.

'Poetry is disease,' said Kafka. 'Yet one does not get well by suppressing the fever. On the contrary! Its heat purifies and illuminates.'

* * *

I lent Doctor Kafka the Czech translation of *Reminiscences of Leo Nikolaievich Tolstoy*, by Maxim Gorki.

Kafka said, 'It is remarkable how Gorki draws a man's character, without pronouncing any judgement. I should very much like one day to read his notes on Lenin.'

'Has Gorki published his reminiscences of Lenin?'

'No, not yet. But I assume that one day he certainly will. Lenin is a friend of Gorki's. But Maxim Gorki sees and experiences everything only through his pen. One realizes that from these notes on Tolstoy. The pen is not an instrument but an organ of the writer's.'

* * *

I quoted, from Grusemann's book on the author of *The Possessed*, the sentence; 'Dostoevsky is a fairy story drenched in blood.'

Franz Kafka said in reply, 'There are no bloodless fairy stories. Every fairy story comes from the depths of blood and fear. In this all fairy stories are alike. Only the surface differs. Northern fairy stories lack the exuberant fauna of the imagination in the fairy stories of the African negro, but the core, the depth of longing, is the same.'

... Some time later he recommended me to read Frobenius' collection of African folk-tales and fairy stories.

* * *

Heinrich Heine.

Kafka: 'An unhappy man. The Germans reproached and still reproach him for being a Jew, and nevertheless he is a German, what is more a little German, who is in conflict with Jewry. That is what is so typically Jewish about him.'

* * *

'Most men are not wicked,' said Franz Kafka, talking of Leonhard Frank's book *Man is Good*. 'Men become bad and guilty because

they speak and act without foreseeing the results of their words and their deeds. They are sleep-walkers, not evildoers.'

* * *

Kafka was in very good spirits.

'You sparkle today,' I said.

Kafka smiled.

'It is only a borrowed light. The reflection of a friendly word. A very good friend, Ludwig Hardt, is in Prague.'

'Is that the reciter, who is to appear in the Corn Exchange?'

'Yes, that is Ludwig Hardt. Do you know him?'

'No, I don't know him. I only saw the advertisement in the newspaper. What is more, recitations don't interest me.'

'Ludwig Hardt must interest you. He is not a pretentious virtuoso. Ludwig Hardt is a servant of the word. He revives and brings to life poems that are buried under the dust of convention. He is a great man.'

'How did you come to know him?'

'I met him through Max ten years ago. On our very first meeting I listened to him for the entire evening. He is an enchanting man. So free, untroubled, vigorous. He comes from somewhere in the north, is a typical Jew, and yet he is a stranger nowhere. The first moment I saw him I felt that I should go on knowing him for a long long time. He is a magician.'

'In what sense a magician?'

'I don't know. But he can stimulate a powerful feeling of freedom. That is why he is a magician. Anyhow we will attend his performance together. I will get the tickets.'

Before Hardt's recital we met the poet Rudolf Fuchs on the steps of the Corn Exchange. We stood with him at the front near the entrance. Kafka attended carefully to the artist, but his look was one of inner oppression. I saw that he had great difficulty in keeping his attention to the programme.

'Are you not feeling well, Herr Doktor?' I asked in the interval, when Fuchs had left us for a moment.

Kafka raised his eyebrows.

'Do I look strange? Is there anything noticeable?'

'No. Only that you seem so peculiar.'

Kafka smiled with narrow, tight-pressed lips.

'It would be very easy to explain myself by being physically unwell. Unfortunately it is nothing of the kind. I feel only a deadly tiredness and emptiness, which always set in whenever something delights me. Probably I have no imagination. Things melt away. Only my grey, hopeless prison-cell remains.'

I did not fully understand his words, but the return of Rudolf Fuchs prevented any questions. After the recital I said good night to Kafka, who with Fuchs, Weltsch, Frau Brod, and others waited for Hardt.

The next day I called on Franz Kafka in his office. He was somewhat taciturn and engaged in no discussion of our evening in the Corn Exchange. Only when I remarked that I knew Rudolf Fuchs's book of poems *Caravan* and his translation of the hymns of Otokar Březina, did he become a little livelier and say:

'Rudolf Fuchs reads with such profound devotion, that he gives not only every good book but every sincere word of a poet a value far above his own humble soul. Therefore he is such a good translator and writes so little himself. His *Caravan* distributes the products of foreign markets. He is a servant of the word.'

We never spoke about Ludwig Hardt again.

* * *

My father gave me for my birthday the poems of Georg Trakl.

Franz Kafka told me that Trakl committed suicide by taking poison, to escape the horrors of the war.

'A deserter to Death,' I said.

'He had too much imagination,' said Kafka. 'So he could not

endure the war, which arose above all from a monstrous lack of imagination.'

* * *

I was ill for ten days, stayed in bed, and did not go to school. My father brought me warm greetings from Doktor Kafka and a brightly coloured volume in the *Insel-Bücherei*: Arthur Schopenhauer, *On Writing and Style*.

A few days after recovering I visited the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution. Doktor Kafka was in very good spirits. When I told him that I felt much better after my illness, a charming smile appeared on his face.

'That is quite natural,' he said. 'You have overcome a meeting with death. That gives one strength.'

'All one's life is only a journey towards death,' I said.

Franz Kafka looked at me gravely for a moment, then lowered his glance to his desk.

'For healthy people, life is only an unconscious and unavowed flight from the consciousness that one day one must die. Illness is always a warning and a trial of strength. And so illness, pain, suffering are the most important sources of religious feeling.'

'In what sense?' I asked.

Kafka smiled.

'In a Jewish sense. I am bound to my family and my race. They outlive the individual. But that also is only an attempted flight from the knowledge of death. It is only a wish. And by such means one gains no knowledge. On the contrary – by such a wish the little, terribly egoistic "I" prefers itself to the truth-seeking soul.'

* * *

'What are you reading?' asked Kafka.

'*Tashkent, the Bountiful City*, by ...'

He did not allow me to finish the sentence.

'It is wonderful. I read it one afternoon a short time ago.'

'It seems to me that the book is more of a document than a work of art,' I said.

'All true art is a document, a statement of evidence,' said Franz Kafka gravely. 'A people with children like those in the book, a people like that can never go under.'

'Perhaps it does not depend on individuals.'

'On the contrary! The species of matter is determined by the number of electrons in the atom. The level of the masses depends on the consciousness of individuals.'

* * *

I accompanied Kafka from the office to his home. It was a cold autumn day, swept by rain and wind.

Kafka said to me on the steps that he could not talk in the open air in such weather.

'That doesn't matter,' I said. 'We shall understand each other all the same.'

Nevertheless as we emerged from the entrance of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution, Kafka stooped, shook himself vigorously, crossed himself with a great Roman cross, and for me all understanding ceased.

Kafka smiled at my astonished face, went back into the building, and said:

'I was speaking Czech – *sakramentská velká zima*!¹ My stooping indicated the force which overpowered me, shivering is the traditional way of expressing cold, and the Cross, that precisely is the sacrament.'

For some unknown reason, his gaiety offended me, and so I said:

¹ *Sakramentská velká zima*. The Czech word *sakramentská* means literally 'sacramentally', but is also used as a popular swear word corresponding precisely to the English 'bloody'. The phrase thus means 'bloody great cold'.

'The sign of the Cross is not a sacrament.'

He laid his hand on my shoulder.

'Not only every sign, but even the merest gesture, is holy if it is filled with faith.'

* * *

Kafka was a convinced adherent of Zionism. We first discussed this subject in the spring of 1920, when I had returned to Prague after a short stay in the country.

At that time I called on Franz Kafka in the office on the Poříč. He was in good spirits, talkative and, it seemed to me, genuinely pleased by an unexpected visit.

'I thought you were far away, and here you are on my doorstep. Weren't you happy in Chlumetz?'

'Oh yes, but ...'

'But here it's better,' concluded Kafka smiling.

'You know - home is home. Elsewhere things are quite different.'

'Home is always different,' said Franz Kafka, with dream-veiled eyes. 'The old home is always new, if one lives consciously, with a sharp awareness of one's relations and duties to others. Men are only free in this way, through their relations to others. And that is the greatest thing in life.'

'Life without freedom is impossible,' I declared.

Franz Kafka looked at me, as if to say, 'Gently, gently,' smiled sadly and said:

'That sounds so convincing that we almost believe it. In fact, things are more difficult. Freedom is life. Lack of liberty is death. But death is just as much a reality as life. And that is precisely the difficulty: that we are exposed to both - to life as well as death.'

'Then it follows that you regard a lack of national independence as a mark of death. The Czech of 1913 is less alive and therefore worse than the Czech of 1920.'

'I did not mean that,' Kafka protested. 'One cannot draw such a sharp distinction between the Czech of 1913 and the Czech of 1920. The Czechs of today have much greater possibilities. Therefore they may be better – if one can speak in such terms.'

'I don't quite understand.'

'I can't make it any clearer and in any case I cannot perhaps express myself any better on such a subject, because I am a Jew.'

'Why not, what has that to do with it?'

'We were talking about the Czechs in 1913 and 1920. To a certain extent that is an historical problem, and so – if I may say so – it immediately brings into question one of the disabilities of the Jews today.'

I must have made a very stupid face, for – to judge by Kafka's voice and attitude – he was more concerned at the moment about my understanding than about the matter under discussion. Leaning forward, he spoke softly, yet clearly and distinctly:

'The Jews today are no longer satisfied with history, with an heroic home in time. They yearn for a modest ordinary home in space. More and more young Jews are returning to Palestine. That is a return to oneself, to one's roots, to growth. The national home in Palestine is for the Jews a necessary goal. On the other hand, for the Czechs, Czechoslovakia is a point of departure.'

'A kind of aerodrome?'

Franz Kafka inclined his head towards his left shoulder.

'Do you think they will ever take off? It seems to me as if I saw in them too great a departure from their foundations, from their own sources of strength. I have never heard of a young eagle learning to make a real eagle's flight by continually and obstinately studying the manoeuvres of a portly carp.'

* * *

In a large corner house on the Bergstein I was looking for the meeting-room of the Jewish Working Men's Association, the *Poale*

Zion. When I spoke to a group of people in the dark courtyard, instead of the information I asked for, I received several blows in the face, so that I took to flight.

The caretaker, whom I fetched, of course found no one left in the courtyard. In a bad temper, he inquired:

'But what do you want from these Jews? After all, you are not a Jew.'

I shook my head.

'No, I am not a Jew.'

'There you are,' said the guardian of the law triumphantly. 'There you have it! What have you to do with that rabble? Thank your stars you only got a couple of punches on the nose, and go back home. Decent people don't mix with Jews.'

* * *

A few days later I told Kafka about my misadventure.

'Anti-semitism increases with Zionism,' he said. 'The self-determination of the Jews is felt as a denial of their environment. As a result inferiority complexes are created which easily come to a head in outbursts of hatred. Of course, in the long run nothing is gained. But that is the root of men's guilt, that they prefer the evil which lies so temptingly close at hand to the moral values which seem so difficult to attain.'

'Perhaps men cannot act otherwise,' I said.

Kafka shook his head vigorously.

'No. Men can act otherwise. The Fall is the proof of their freedom.'

* * *

Franz Kafka remarked in the course of a conversation about an anthology of Jewish stories from Eastern Europe:

'Perez, Asch, and all the other Eastern European Jewish writers always write stories which are in fact folk-stories. And that is quite

right. Jewry is not merely a question of faith, it is above all a question of the practice of a way of life in a community conditioned by faith.'

* * *

My friend Leo Lederer gave me an illustrated monograph on Michael Angelo.

I showed the book to Franz Kafka, and for a long time he studied the picture of the seated Moses.

'That is not a leader,' he said. 'He is a judge, a stern judge. In the end men can only lead by means of harsh, inexorable judgement.'

* * *

Telling me about his journeys in Germany and France, he said of Max Brod:

'These travels strengthened our friendship. That is only natural. In foreign surroundings, the native and familiar becomes clearer and more distinct to us. That – I think – is the source of Jewish jokes about Jews. We see each other better than other people, because we are together on a journey.'

* * *

A walk on the quay.

I asked the meaning of the word 'Diaspora'. Kafka said it was the Greek expression for the dispersion of the Jewish people. The Hebrew word is 'Galut'.

He said, 'The Jewish people is scattered, as a seed is scattered. As a seed of corn absorbs matter from its surroundings, stores it up, and achieves further growth, so the destiny of the Jews is to absorb the potentialities of mankind, purify them, and give them a higher development. Moses is still a reality. As Abiram and Dathan opposed Moses with the words "*Lo naale!* We will not go up!" so

the world opposes him with the cry of anti-semitism. In order not to rise to the human condition, men sink into the dark depths of the zoological doctrine of race. They beat the Jews, and murder humanity.'

* * *

'Jews and Germans have much in common,' said Kafka, in a conversation about Dr Karel Kramář. 'They are energetic, able, industrious, and thoroughly detested by everyone else. Jews and Germans are outcasts.'

'Perhaps they are hated for the very qualities you mention,' I said. But Kafka shook his head.

'Oh, no! There is a much deeper reason. In the end, it is a religious reason. In the case of the Jews, this is clear. In the case of the Germans, it is not so apparent, because their temple has not yet been destroyed. But that will come.'

'What do you mean?' I said in bewilderment. 'After all, the Germans are not a theocracy. They have no national God in a temple of his own.'

'So most people think, but in fact it is not so,' said Kafka. 'The Germans have the God, who made the iron grow. His temple is Prussian General Staff.'

We laughed. Franz Kafka, however, declared that he was perfectly serious and only laughed because I did. His laughter was only an infection.

* * *

Franz Kafka told me that the Prague Jewish poet Oskar Baum had as a small boy attended the German primary school. On the way home there were frequently fights between the German and the Czech pupils. In one of these scuffles, Oskar Baum was hit over the eyes with a wooden pencil-box so hard, that the retina came away from the base of the eyeball, and Oskar Baum lost his sight.

'The Jew Oskar Baum lost his eyesight as a German,' said Franz

Kafka. 'As something in fact which he never was, and which he was never accepted as being. Perhaps Oskar is merely a melancholy symbol of the so-called German Jews in Prague.'

* * *

We spoke about the relations of the Germans and the Czechs. I said that to publish a Czech history in German would make for better understanding between the two nations.

Kafka, however, dismissed this with a resigned wave of the hand.

'It would be pointless,' he said. 'Who would read it? Only Czechs and Jews. Certainly not the Germans, because they do not wish to comprehend, understand, read. They only wish to possess and to rule, and for that understanding is usually only a hindrance. One oppresses one's neighbour much better when one doesn't know him. The pangs of conscience disappear. For that reason, no one knows the history of the Jews.'

I protested, 'That isn't true. Even in the first form of the primary school they teach Scripture, that is to say, a part of the history of the Jewish people.'

Kafka smiled bitterly.

'Just so! The history of the Jews is given the appearance of a fairy tale, which men can dismiss, together with their childhood, into the pit of oblivion.'

* * *

I was saying good-bye to my friend Leo Lederer on the Square of the Republic when Franz Kafka unexpectedly approached me.

'I followed you all the way from Teschnov,' he said after the usual words of greeting. 'You were quite lost in your conversation.'

'Leo was explaining Taylorism to me, and the division of labour in industry.'

'It is a terrible subject.'

'You are thinking of the enslavement of mankind, Herr Doktor?'

'It is much worse than that. Such a violent outrage can only end in enslavement to evil. It is inevitable. Time, the noblest and most essential element in all creative work, is conscripted into the net of corrupt business interests. Thereby not only creative work, but man himself, who is its essential part, is polluted and humiliated. A Taylorized life is a terrible curse which will give rise only to hunger and misery instead of the intended wealth and profit. It is an advance ...'

'Towards the end of the world,' I completed his sentence.

Franz Kafka shook his head.

'If one could only say that with certainty. But it is by no means certain. So one can say nothing. One can only scream, stammer, choke. The conveyor belt of life carries one somewhere – but one doesn't know where. One is a thing, an object – rather than a living organism.'

Kafka suddenly stood still and stretched out his hand.

'Look! There, there! Can you see it?'

Out of a house in the Jakobsgasse, where we had arrived in the course of our discussion, ran a small dog looking like a ball of wool, which crossed our path and disappeared round the corner of the Templegasse.

'A pretty little dog,' I said.

'A dog?' asked Kafka suspiciously, and slowly began to move again.

'A small, young dog. Didn't you see it?'

'I saw. But was it a dog?'

'It was a little poodle.'

'A poodle? It could be a dog, but it could also be a sign. We Jews often make tragic mistakes.'

'It was only a dog,' I said.

'It would be a good thing if it was.' Kafka nodded. 'But the

only is true only for him who uses it. What one person takes to be a bundle of rags, or a dog, is for another a sign.'

'Odradek,¹ in your story *The Cares of the Father*,' I said.

Kafka did not respond to my words, and continued his former train of thought with a final sentence:

'There is always something unaccounted for.'

We walked in silence across the Temhof. At the side door of the Teinkirche I said:

'Bloy writes that the tragic guilt of the Jews is that they did not recognize the Messiah.'

'Perhaps that is really so,' said Kafka. 'Perhaps they really did not recognize him. But what a cruel God it is who makes it possible for his creatures not to recognize him. After all, a father always makes himself known to his children, when they cannot think or speak properly. But this is not a subject for a conversation on the street. Besides, I've reached home.'

Kafka nodded his head towards his father's warehouse, stretched out his hand and said good-bye, and with rapid steps disappeared into the Kinsky Palace.

* * *

I had with me a review, published by the Salesians, which contained an account of a boy's town founded near Omaha in Nebraska in 1917 by an Irish priest, Father Flanagan. Kafka read the article and said:

'All our towns and monuments have been created by crazy children like that, who have found freedom in submission.'

* * *

Franz Kafka turned the pages of a book by Alfons Paquet, *The*

¹ Odradek is the name of an apparition who figures in Kafka's story *The Cares of the Father* in the volume *A Country Doctor*.

Spirit of the Russian Revolution, which I had brought with me to his office.

‘Would you like to read it?’ I asked.

‘No, thank you,’ said Kafka, and handed me the book across his desk. ‘At the moment I have no time. A pity. In Russia men are trying to construct an absolutely just world. It is a religious matter.’

‘But Bolshevism is opposed to religion.’

‘That is because it is itself a religion. These interventions, revolts, the blockade – what are they? They are little rehearsals for the great and cruel religious wars, which will sweep across the world.’

* * *

We met a large group of workmen who were marching with flags and banners to a meeting.

Kafka said, ‘These people are so self-possessed, so self-confident and good humoured. They rule the streets, and therefore think they rule the world. In fact, they are mistaken. Behind them already are the secretaries, officials, professional politicians, all the modern satraps for whom they are preparing the way to power.’

‘You do not believe in the power of the masses?’

‘It is before my eyes, this power of the masses, formless and apparently chaotic, which then seeks to be given a form and a discipline. At the end of every truly revolutionary development there appears a Napoleon Bonaparte.’

‘You don’t believe in a wider expansion of the Russian Revolution?’

Kafka was silent for a moment, then he said:

‘As a flood spreads wider and wider, the water becomes shallower and dirtier. The Revolution evaporates, and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy. The chains of tormented mankind are made out of red tape.’

* * *

I gave Franz Kafka an account of a lecture on the situation in Russia, which had been arranged by the Union of Marxist Students in the Rosa Room of the social democratic House of the People in the Hybernergasse, and which I had attended with my father. When I finished my account, Franz Kafka said:

'I understand nothing about politics. Of course, that is a fault, which I should be glad to correct. But then I have so many faults! Even the most commonplace matters always elude me. How I admire Max Brod, who knows his way about even in the underworld of politics. He talks to me very often and at great length about the affairs of the day. I listen to him as I am listening to you, and yet – I can never get to the heart of the matter.'

'Did I not express myself clearly?'

'You misunderstand me. You expressed yourself well. The fault is mine. The war, the revolution in Russia, and the misery of the whole world seem to me like a flood of evil. It is an inundation. The war has opened the flood gates of chaos. The buttresses of human existence are collapsing. Historical development is no longer determined by the individual but by the masses. We are shoved, rushed, swept away. We are the victims of history.'

'You mean, that man no longer has a part in creating the world?'

Kafka made a few slight swaying movements with his body.

'You again misunderstand me. On the contrary, man has rejected his partnership and joint responsibility in the world.'

'That cannot be possible. Do you not see the growth of the working-class movement? The mobility of the masses?'

My remark was an echo of the lecture on the situation in Russia and my father's comments on it.

'That's just it,' said Franz Kafka. 'Their movement deprives us of the possibility of seeing. Our consciousness is shrinking. Without noticing it, we are losing our awareness, without losing life.'

'So you mean, that men are becoming irresponsible?'

Franz Kafka smiled bitterly.

spring of 1923, I showed this large volume to Franz Kafka, he gazed for a long time at Arnold Böcklin's picture, *War*, and V. V. Vereschagin's, *The Pyramid of Skulls*.

'No one ever gives a true picture of war,' said Kafka. 'Usually they only show its subsidiary aspects or events – like this pyramid of skulls. Yet the terrible thing about war is the dissolution of all existing certainties and conventions. The animal and physical grows rank and stifles everything spiritual. It is like a cancer. Man no longer lives for years, months, days, hours, but only for moments. And even the moment is not really lived. Man is only conscious of it. He merely exists.'

'That is because he is near to death,' I said.

'It is because of the knowledge and the fear of death.'

'Isn't that the same thing?'

'No, it is not the same. Anyone who grasps life completely has no fear of dying. The fear of death is merely the result of an unfulfilled life. It is a symptom of betrayal.'

* * *

We discussed one of the numerous international conferences that followed the war.

Franz Kafka said, 'The intellectual level of these great political meetings is that of ordinary coffee-house conversation. People talk loud and long, in order to say as little as possible. The really true and interesting things are the intrigues in the background, about which not a word is mentioned.'

'So in your opinion the Press is not a servant of truth.'

A painful smile pinched the corners of Kafka's mouth.

'Truth, which is one of the few really great and precious things, in life, cannot be bought. Man receives it as a gift, like love or beauty. But a newspaper is a commodity, which is bought and sold.'

'So the Press only panders to man's stupidity,' I inquired anxiously.

Franz Kafka laughed, and thrust his chin forward triumphantly.

'No, no! Everything, even lies, advances the truth. Shadows do not blot out the sun.'

* * *

Franz Kafka was extremely cynical about the Press. He used to smile when he saw me with a bundle of newspapers.

Once he said, "The expression "buried away in the newspapers" really sums up the situation. The papers offer us the events of the world – stone upon stone, a clod of dirt upon a clod of dirt; a heap of earth and sand. But where is its meaning? To see history as an accumulation of events is meaningless. What matters is the significance of the events. But we shall not discover that in the newspapers: we shall only discover it in faith, in the objectivization of what seems accidental.'

* * *

I entered Kafka's office. There was nobody there. Papers lying open, two pears on a plate, a few newspapers were evidence that he was in the building. So I sat in the 'visitor's chair' near his writing-table, picked up the *Prager Tagblatt* and began to read.

After a little while Kafka came in.

'Have you been waiting long?'

'No, I have been reading.' I showed him an article in the newspaper on the League Assembly.

Kafka made a helpless gesture.

'The League! Is it in any sense a real league of nations? It seems to me that the title League of Nations is only a disguise for a new battlefield.'

'Do you mean that the League is not a peace organization?'

'The League is a machinery for localizing the battle. The war continues, only now with other weapons. Banks take the place of divisions; the fighting capacity of finance takes the place of the war potential of industry. The League is not a league of nations: it is a stock exchange for various groups of interests.'

* * *

I drew Franz Kafka's interest to a long article on the reparations problem. He looked away from the newspaper, pushed his under lip slightly forward, and said:

'In the end the problem is quite simple. The only really difficult and insoluble problems are those which we cannot formulate, because they have the difficulties of life itself as their content.'

* * *

We discussed a newspaper article which spoke of the poor prospects of peace in Europe.

'Yet the Peace Treaty is final,' I said.

'Nothing is final,' said Franz Kafka. 'Since Abraham Lincoln nothing is finally settled unless it is justly settled.'

'When will that be?' I asked.

'Who knows? Men are not gods. History is made out of the failures and heroism of each insignificant moment. If one throws a stone into a river, it produces a succession of ripples. But most men live without being conscious of a responsibility which extends beyond themselves. And that – I think – is at the root of our misery.'

'What do you think of the case of Max Hoelz?' I asked.

The leader of the 1921 rising in Central Germany had been arrested on the Czech side of the German frontier. The Czech government refused to extradite him to Germany.

'Can you achieve good through evil? The strength which sets itself against fate is in fact a weakness. Surrender and acceptance are

much stronger. But the Marquis de Sade does not understand that.'

'The Marquis de Sade!' I exclaimed.

'Yes,' Franz Kafka nodded. 'The Marquis de Sade, whose biography you lent me, is the real patron of our era.'

'That isn't really true.'

'Yes. The Marquis de Sade can obtain pleasure only through the sufferings of others, just as the luxury of the rich is paid for by the misery of the poor.'

To cover my defeat, I dived into my brief-case and showed him some reproductions of pictures by Vincent van Gogh.

Kafka was delighted by them.

'This restaurant garden with the violet night in the background is very beautiful,' he said. 'The others are lovely too. But the restaurant garden is wonderful. Do you know his drawings?'

'No, I do not.'

'What a pity! They are in the book of *Letters from the Asylum*. Perhaps you will find the book somewhere. I should so like to be able to draw. As a matter of fact, I am always trying to. But nothing comes of it. My drawings are purely personal picture writing, whose meaning even I cannot discover after a time.'

* * *

I showed him the anniversary number of a Viennese weekly paper, containing pictures of the most important events of the last fifty years.

'That is history,' I said.

Kafka pursed his mouth.

'Why? History is even more absurd than these old pictures, since for the most part it consists of official negotiations.'

* * *

I told Kafka my dream. President Masaryk was walking on the Quay, like a perfectly ordinary citizen. I saw him clearly, his beard, the eyeglasses, arms crossed behind his back, his loose, open, winter overcoat. Franz Kafka smiled.

'Your dream suits Masaryk's personality. You could quite easily meet the head of the state so informally. Masaryk is such a strong personality that he can almost entirely dispense with the outward attributes of power. He is without dogma, and therefore he seems so human.'

* * *

I described what happened at a meeting of the National Democrats in Karolinenthal, at which the chief speaker was the Finance Minister, Dr A. Rašín.

'He is a professional gladiator,' said Kafka. 'Down with the Germans is his battlecry, and in using it he makes himself the mouth-piece of people who have far more in common with the hated Germans who are in power than with the powerless Czech masses.'

'How is that?'

'Mountain peaks see each other. Hollows and little valleys which lie in their shadow are oblivious of each other, although they usually lie on the same contour.'

I found on Kafka's writing-table a pamphlet, *Očista* (*The Purge*) directed against the Foreign Minister, Beneš.

Franz Kafka said, 'They reproach Doctor Beneš with being wealthy. That is a poor criticism. Doctor Beneš is extraordinarily able. Because of his abilities and connections he would have acquired wealth under any circumstances. It wouldn't have mattered if he sold socks or waste paper. The commodity he deals in is neither here nor there. He is a great man of the commercial world. That is what matters to him – and to the others. So that this abuse is formally quite accurate, but politically absurd. They aim at the man, without hitting his acts.'

* * *

Certain changes in organization were to be carried out in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution. My father was working on a memorandum on the subject. At lunch he made notes on the blank margin of his newspaper, and at night he shut himself up in the dining-room.

Kafka smiled when I told him.

'Your father is a dear elderly child,' he said. 'But so is everyone who believes in reforms. They do not see that the world picture only alters in that something dies and something is born. Something falls, and something springs up. That changes the arrangement of the splinters in the kaleidoscope. But only very small children believe that they have reconstructed the toy.'

* * *

My father spoke about Franz Kafka with great reserve. From his remarks one might gather that my father was interested in Doktor Kafka, but always with the feeling that he did not quite understand him. Franz Kafka, on the other hand, not only respected my father but had a deep understanding of him.

'Your father always surprises me by his versatility,' he said. 'Things are so real to him. Everything is so near and intimate. He must be a man of deep faith, otherwise he could not come so near to what seem to be the simplest things in the world.'

I told him that my father devoted his spare time to carpentry and to locksmith's work. I described his enthusiasm and ambition as a craftsman with humorous exaggeration. But my manner did not appeal to Franz Kafka. He drew his eyebrows together, pushed his underlip forward, gazed at me sternly, and said:

'Don't laugh! Do not behave as if you wished to close your eyes to what is beautiful. You are only disguising your pride. For you are proud of your father. And rightly. He is so moving and creative because he has no vanity. But this fact embarrasses you. You

laugh, because it hurts you that you cannot join your father in his carpentry and metalwork. Your smiles? They are unshed tears.'

* * *

'I have been reading Werfel's poetic drama, *Mirrorman*.'

'I have known the play for a long time,' said Kafka. 'Twice Werfel has read aloud various parts of it to us. The words sound well, but – to be quite candid – I do not understand the play. Werfel is a vessel with thick walls. It emits sound much more readily as a result of various forms of mechanical percussion from without than because of the ferment within.'

'Is it true that he is writing a long novel about music?' I asked. Kafka nodded.

'Yes, he has been working on it for a long time. It is to be a novel about Verdi and Wagner. He will certainly read parts of it to us as soon as he returns to Prague.'

'You say that with such a depressed expression,' I said. 'Do you not like Werfel?'

'Oh, yes, I even like him very much,' said Franz Kafka emphatically. 'I knew him even as a schoolboy. Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Werfel, and I often went on excursions together. He was the youngest of us, and therefore perhaps the most serious. His youth boiled over within him. He read us his poems. We lay in the grass and blinked at the sun. It was such a splendid time that the mere memory of it makes me love Werfel, like my other companions of those days.'

'You sound sad,' I said.

Kafka smiled, as if he wished to apologize.

'Happy memories taste much better mixed with grief. So in fact I am not sad, but only greedy for pleasure.'

'These are the bitter roots Franz Blei speaks of.'

We both laughed, but only for a moment.

Franza Kafka immediately became serious again.

'In reality, it is not so at all,' he said. 'When I think that I understand nothing about my great friends' greatest passion, about music, a kind of gentle bitter-sweet sadness takes hold of me. It is only a breath of wind, an air of death. In a moment it has gone. Yet it makes me realize how illimitably far away I am from even those who are nearest to me, and so an evil look comes on my face, for which you must forgive me.'

'What have I to forgive? You have done me no harm. On the contrary, I should apologize for my questions.'

Kafka laughed.

'The simplest solution; the blame shall be shared with you. I shall infect you.'

Kafka opened the drawer of his desk and reached out to me a gay little volume published by the Insel Verlag.

'*Tales the Desert Fathers Told*,' I read the title aloud.

'It is charming,' said Kafka. 'I enjoyed it enormously. The monks are in the desert; but the desert is not in them. It is music! There is no need to give me the book back.'

* * *

Franz Kafka could suddenly illuminate controversial subjects by a single remark. Yet he never tried to appear intellectual, or even witty. Whatever he said seemed, in his mouth, simple, obvious, and natural. This was not the effect of any special conjunction of words, of his play of features, or of his tone of voice. It was Kafka's whole personality which affected the listener. He was so quiet and calm. Yet his eyes were lively and brilliant, though they began to blink if, to his helpless embarrassment, I mentioned music or his own literary work in our conversations.

'Music for me is rather like the sea,' he once said. 'I am overpowered, wonderstruck, enthralled, and yet afraid, so terribly afraid of its endlessness. I am in fact a bad sailor. Max Brod is quite different. He dives head first into the flood of sound. He is a Channel swimmer.'

'Max Brod is a lover of music?'

'He understands music, as few people ever have. At least, that is what Vítězslav Novák says.'

'Do you know Novák?'

Kafka nodded.

'Slightly. Novák and many other Czech composers and musicians are with Max continually. They like him very much. And he helps them. He helps them all, whenever he has a chance. That is what Max is like.'

'So Doktor Max Brod must speak good Czech.'

'Excellent. I envy him. Look ...'

He opened a pigeon-hole in his desk.

'Here are two complete annual volumes of the review *Náš Reč* (*Our Language*). I read it and study it ardently. What a pity that I don't possess all the previous issues. I should love to have them. Language is the music and breath of home. I – but I am badly asthmatic, since I can speak neither Czech nor Hebrew. I am learning both. But that is as if one were pursuing a dream. How can one find outside oneself something which ought to come from within?'

Kafka closed the pigeon-hole of his desk.

'The Karpfengasse in the Jewish quarter, where I was born, is immeasurably far from home.'¹

'I was born in Yugoslavia,' I said, because I was upset by the expression in his eyes.

But Franz Kafka slowly shook his head.

'From the Jewish quarter to the Teinkirche is much, much farther. I come from another world.'

* * *

¹ Kafka was born at No. 7 Karpfengasse, in the Judenstadt. In speaking of 'home' here he means, of course, the Jewish national home. When later in this conversation he speaks of the distance being far greater from the Teinkirche to the Jewish quarter, he means that, though the Teinkirche is itself in the Jewish quarter, yet, being a Christian church, it is infinitely alien from its surroundings.

On another occasion, when we happened to speak about the Czech linguistic purists, he said:

'The greatest difficulty of the Czech language is to demarcate it properly from other languages. It is young, and therefore one must protect it carefully.'

* * *

'Music creates new, subtler, more complicated, and therefore more dangerous pleasures,' Franz Kafka said once. 'But poetry aims at clarifying the wilderness of pleasures, at intellectualizing, purifying, and therefore humanizing them. Music is a multiplication of sensuous life; poetry, on the other hand, disciplines and elevates it.'

* * *

I tried to explain the intellectual content of a play which I had been reading.

'And all this is simply stated?' asked Kafka.

'No,' I answered. 'The author tries to present these ideas concretely.'

He nodded quickly.

'Quite right. Simply to say something, is not enough. One must live it. And for this language is an essential intermediary, something living, a medium. Yet language also must not be used as a means but must be experienced, suffered. Language is an eternal mistress.'

* * *

Of an anthology of expressionist poetry he said:

'The book depresses me. These poets stretch out their hands to people. But the people see, not friendly hands, but violently clenched fists aimed at their eyes and their hearts.'

* * *

We talked about Plato's *Laws*, which I had read in the edition published by the Eugen Diederich Verlag.

I objected to Plato's exclusion of the poet from the community of the state.

Kafka said, 'That is perfectly reasonable. Poets try to give men a different vision, in order to change reality. For that reason they are politically dangerous elements, because they want to make a change. For the state, and all its devoted servants, want only one thing, to persist.'

* * *

I accompanied Franz Kafka home from his office.

At the entrance to his parents' house we unexpectedly met Felix Weltsch, Max Brod and his wife. They exchanged a few words and arranged to meet in the evening at Oskar Baum's.

When Kafka's friends had left us, he remembered suddenly that I had never met Brod's wife before.

'And I didn't introduce you properly,' he said. 'I am really very sorry.'

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'I could at least look at her all the better.'

'Did you like her?'

'She has wonderful blue eyes,' I said.

Kafka was astonished.

'You noticed that at once?'

'I make a study of eyes. They tell me more than words,' I said pompously.

But Franz Kafka did not hear. He gazed gravely into the distance.

'All my friends have wonderful eyes,' he said. 'The light of their eyes is the only illumination of the dark dungeon in which I live. And even that is only artificial light.'

He laughed, gave me his hand, and went into the house.

* * *

He once said about insomnia, from which he suffered:

'Perhaps my insomnia only conceals a great fear of death. Perhaps I am afraid that the soul – which in sleep leaves me – will never return. Perhaps insomnia is only an all too vivid sense of sin, which is afraid of the possibility of a sudden judgement. Perhaps insomnia is itself a sin. Perhaps it is a rejection of the natural.'

I remarked that insomnia is an illness.

Kafka replied, 'Sin is the root of all illness. That is the reason for mortality.'

* * *

I went with Kafka to an exhibition of French painting in the gallery on the Graben.

There were some pictures by Picasso: cubist still-lives and rose-coloured women with gigantic feet.

'He is a wilful distortionist,' I said.

'I do not think so,' said Kafka. 'He only registers the deformities which have not yet penetrated our consciousness. Art is a mirror, which goes "fast", like a watch – sometimes.'

I took him photographs of constructivist pictures.

Kafka said, 'They are merely dreams of a marvellous America, of a wonderland of unlimited possibilities. That is perfectly understandable, because Europe is becoming more and more a land of impossible limitations.'

* * *

We saw a collection of political drawings by George Grosz.

'What hatred!' I said.

Franz Kafka gave a strange smile.

'Disappointed youth,' he said. 'It is a hatred which springs from the impossibility of love. The force of expression comes from a perfectly definite weakness. That is the source of the despair and

violence in these drawings. What is more, in some annual I have seen poems by Grosz.'

Kafka pointed to the drawings.

'They are literature in pictures.'

* * *

I showed Kafka some new books published by the firm of Neugebauer. As he was turning the leaves of a volume with illustrations by George Grosz, he said:

'That is the familiar view of Capital – the fat man in a top hat squatting on the money of the poor.'

'It is only an allegory,' I said.

Franz Kafka drew his eyebrows together.

'You say "only"! In men's thoughts the allegory becomes an image of reality, which is naturally a mistake. But the error already exists here.'

'You mean, Herr Doktor, that the picture is false?'

'I would not quite say that. It is both true and false. It is true only in one sense. It is false, in that it proclaims this incomplete view to be the whole truth. The fat man in the top hat sits on the necks of the poor. That is correct. But the fat man is Capitalism, and that is not quite correct. The fat man oppresses the poor man within the conditions of a given system. But he is not the system itself. He is not even its master. On the contrary, the fat man also is in chains, which the picture does not show. The picture is not complete. For that reason it is not good. Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, and from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul.'

'Then how would you picture it?'

Doktor Kafka shrugged his shoulders and smiled sadly.

'I don't know. In any case we Jews are not painters. We cannot

depict things statically. We see them always in transition, in movement, as change. We are story-tellers.'

The entry of one of the staff broke off our conversation.

When the disturbing visitor had gone, I wanted to return to the interesting topic of conversation which we had begun. Kafka, however, cut me off and said:

'Let us forget about it. A story-teller cannot talk about story-telling. He tells stories or is silent. That is all. His world begins to vibrate within him, or it sinks into silence. My world is dying away. I am burnt out.'

* * *

I showed him my portrait, drawn by my friend Vladimír Sychra.

Kafka was delighted with the portrait.

'The drawing is wonderful. It is full of truth,' he said several times.

'Do you mean that it is true to life as a photograph is?'

'What are you thinking of? Nothing can be so deceiving as a photograph. Truth, after all, is an affair of the heart. One can get at it only through art.'

* * *

'The actual reality is always unrealistic,' said Franz Kafka. 'Look at the clarity, purity, and veracity of a Chinese coloured woodcut. To speak like that – that would be something!'

* * *

We looked at Josef Čapek's linocuts in the left-wing periodical *Červen* (June).

'I cannot quite understand the form of expression,' I said.

'Then you do not understand the content either,' said Franz

Kafka. 'The form is not the expression of the content but only its attraction, the door and the way to the content. If it succeeds, then the hidden background also reveals itself.'

* * *

Franz Kafka gave me some issues of a review, *The Brenner*, which contained essays by Theodore Haecker, translations of Kierkegaard, and also Carl Dallago's essays on Giovanni Segantini.

Reading it aroused my interest in this painter of the Southern Alps. So I was very pleased when my friend, the young actor Franz Lederer, gave me Segantini's *Writings and Letters*. I showed the book to Kafka, and drew his attention especially to the following paragraph, which pleased me greatly:

'Art is not that truth which is and exists outside of us. That has, and can have, no value as art; it is, and can only be, a blind imitation of nature, that is to say, simply giving back to nature her own material. But the material must be worked on by the spirit before it can develop into eternal art.'

Franz Kafka gave me the book back across his writing-table, for a moment looked into space, then turned to me impetuously:

'The material must be worked on by the spirit? What does that mean? It means to experience, nothing else except to experience and to master what is experienced. That is what matters.'

* * *

Franz Kafka always gave a look of surprise when I told him I had been to the cinema. Once I reacted to this change of expression by asking:

'Don't you like the cinema?'

After a moment's thought Kafka replied:

'As a matter of fact I've never thought about it. Of course it is a marvellous toy. But I cannot bear it, because perhaps I am too

"optical" by nature. I am an Eye-man. But the cinema disturbs one's vision. The speed of the movements and the rapid change of images force men to look continually from one to another. Sight does not master the pictures, it is the pictures which master one's sight. They flood one's consciousness. The cinema involves putting the eye into uniform, when before it was naked.'

'That is a terrible statement,' I said. 'The eye is the window of the soul, a Czech proverb says.'

Kafka nodded.

'Films are iron shutters.'

* * *

A few days later I recurred to this conversation.

'The cinema is a terrible power,' I said. 'It is far more powerful than the Press. Shopgirls, models, seamstresses, all have faces like Barbara La Marr, Mary Pickford, and Pearl White.'

'That is quite natural. The desire for beauty turns women into actresses. Real life is only a reflection of the dreams of poets. The strings of the lyre of modern poets are endless strips of celluloid.'

* * *

We talked about a literary inquiry carried out by a Prague newspaper, which began with the question: Is there a young Art?

I said, 'Isn't it odd, to search for a young art? There is only art or trash, which often hides under the masks of various -isms and fashions.'

Franz Kafka said, 'The point of the question is not in the substantive "Art", but in the limiting term "young". From this it is clear that there are serious doubts about the very existence of an artistic younger generation. And indeed today it is difficult to conceive of a younger generation which is free and unburdened. The terrible flood of these last years has drowned everything. Even the

children. Of course, corruption and youth mutually exclude each other. But what is the youth of men of today? It is the friend and intimate of corruption. Men know the power of corruption. But they have forgotten the power of youth. Therefore they are in doubt about youth itself. And can there be art without the ecstasy of the confidence of youth?’

Franz Kafka stretched out his arms, then let them drop as if paralysed into his lap.

‘Youth is weak. The pressure from without is so strong. To defend and at the same time dedicate oneself – it causes a convulsion that shows on one’s face like a grimace. The language of young artists today hides more than it reveals.’

I told him that the young artists whom I had met at Lydia Holzer’s were usually people of about forty.

Franz Kafka nodded.

‘That would be so. Many men are now recovering their youth for the first time. For the first time they are passing through the cowboy-and-Indian stage. Naturally, not so that they scamper along the paths of the municipal park armed with bows and arrows. No! They sit in the cinema and watch adventure films. That’s all it is. The darkened cinema is the magic lantern of their wasted youth.’

* * *

In conversation about young writers Franz Kafka said:

‘I envy the young.’

I said, ‘You are not so old yourself.’

Kafka smiled.

‘I am as old as Jewry, as the wandering Jew.’

I gave him a look out of the corner of my eye.

Kafka put his arm round my shoulder.

‘Now you are shocked. That was only a miserable effort to make a joke. But I really do envy youth. The older one grows, the larger

one's horizon. But the possibilities of life grow smaller and smaller. In the end, one can give only one look upwards, give one breath outwards. At that moment a man probably surveys his whole life. For the first time – and the last time.'

* * *

Richard Hülsenbeck, the leader of Dadaism in Germany, gave a lecture in Prague.

I wrote a report on it and gave the manuscript to Kafka.

'Your report should be headed Yuyu not Dada,' he said, after he had read the article. 'Your sentences are filled with a longing for human beings. That is, fundamentally, with a longing for growth, for an extension of one's own little I, for community. So you escape from the loneliness of the sad little I into a world of childish follies. It is a voluntary and therefore enjoyable error. But all the same an error – how can one find another, by losing oneself? But the other – that is, the world in all its magnificent depths – only reveals itself in quietness. But the only way you can find peace is to raise your fingers in accusation: "You, you!"'

I burnt the manuscript.

* * *

I wrote an article about Oskar Baum's novel, *The Door to the Impossible*.

Franz Kafka gave it to Felix Weltsch, who published it as a middle in the periodical *Self Defence*. A few days later in Kafka's office I encountered an official – I think his name was Gutling – who immediately began to analyse my article.

His criticism was, of course, hostile.

My review, together with Baum's novel were – in the speaker's eyes – 'dadaist revelations of a diseased mind'.

I said nothing.

When, however, he repeated his assertion for about the fifteenth time, Kafka intervened:

'If Dada is diseased, even then it is only an outward symptom, nothing else. But you will not abolish the disease by isolating and suppressing the symptom. On the contrary, it will only become worse. A single abscess that breaks internally is far more dangerous than several surface abscesses. If there is to be a genuine improvement, you must go to the root of the diseased condition. Only then will the disfigurements resulting from the disorder disappear.'

Gutling did not reply.

The arrival of another official ended our discussion.

When I was alone again with Kafka in the office, I asked:

'Do you also think that my essay on Baum's book was dadaist?'

Kafka smiled.

'Why do you ask? Your essay wasn't even discussed.'

'But please ...'

Kafka made a contemptuous gesture with his hand.

'That isn't criticism! The critic brandished the word "Dada" as a small child waves a toy sword. He wants to dazzle you with the terrible weapon, because he knows very well that in fact it is only a toy. It is enough to face him with a real sabre for the child to calm down, because he is afraid for his toy.'

'So you were not talking about Baum, and what I had written, but about Dada?'

'Yes, I girded on my sword.'

'But you also regard Dada as a mark of disease,' I said.

'Dada is - a crime,' said Franz Kafka very seriously. 'The spine of the soul has been broken. Faith has collapsed.'

'What is faith?'

'Whoever has faith cannot define it, and whoever has none can only give a definition which lies under the shadow of grace withheld. The man of faith cannot speak and the man of no faith ought

not to speak. And in fact the prophets always talk of the levers of faith and never of faith alone.'

'They are the voice of a faith which is silent about itself.'

'Yes, that is so.'

'And Christ?'

Kafka bowed his head.

'He is an abyss filled with light. One must close one's eyes if one is not to fall into it. Max Brod is writing a long work called *Paganism, Christianity, Jewry*. Perhaps in argument with the book I may clarify my own mind a little.'

'Do you expect so much of the book?'

'Not only from the book, but most of all from every single moment. I try to be a true attendant upon grace. Perhaps it will come – perhaps it will not come. Perhaps this quiet yet unquiet waiting is the harbinger of grace, or perhaps it is grace itself. I do not know. But that does not disturb me. In the meantime I – have made friends with my ignorance.'

* * *

We fell into conversation about the worth and worthlessness of the different confessions.

I tried to obtain a personal declaration from Kafka; but I did not succeed.

Franz Kafka said, 'God can only be comprehended personally. Each man has his own life and his own God. His protector and judge. Priests and rituals are only crutches for the crippled life of the soul.'

* * *

When Kafka saw a crime novel among the books in my briefcase, he said:

'There is no need to be ashamed of reading such things. Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment* is after all only a crime novel. And Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? It is a detective story. At the heart of the action is a mystery, which is gradually brought to light. But is there a greater mystery than the truth? Poetry is always an expedition in search of truth.'

'But what is truth?'

Kafka was silent, then gave a sly smile.

'That sounds as if you had caught me out in an empty phrase. In fact, it is not so. Truth is what every man needs in order to live, but can obtain or purchase from no one. Each man must reproduce it for himself from within, otherwise he must perish. Life without truth is not possible. Truth is perhaps life itself.'

* * *

I showed Franz Kafka the German translation of Oscar Wilde's essays, *Intentions*, which Leo Lederer had given me.

Kafka turned the leaves and said:

'It sparkles and seduces, as only a poison can sparkle and seduce.'

'Do you not like the book?'

'I did not say that. On the contrary: one could like it only too easily. And that is one of the book's great dangers. For it is dangerous, because it plays with truth. A game with truth is always a game with life.'

'Do you mean then that without truth there is no real life?'

Franz Kafka nodded in silence.

After a short pause he said:

'A lie is often an expression of the fear that one may be crushed by the truth. It is a projection of one's own littleness, of the sin of which one is afraid.'

* * *

I told him that my father and I had visited the Franciscan monastery near the Wenzelplatz in Prague.

Franz Kafka said, 'It is a family community based on choice. Man voluntarily limits his own self, surrenders his highest and most real property, his own person, in order to find salvation. By outward restraint he tries to achieve inner freedom. That is the meaning of self-submission to the Law.'

'But if a man does not know the Law,' I said, 'how will he achieve freedom?'

'He will have the law beaten into him. If he does not know the Law, he will be harried and whipped into knowledge.'

'So you mean that sooner or later every man must arrive at true knowledge.'

'I did not quite say that. I did not speak of knowledge, but of freedom as a goal. The knowledge is only a way ...'

'To fulfilment? Then life is only a task, a commission.'

Kafka made a helpless gesture.

'That is just it. Man cannot see beyond himself. He is in the dark.'

* * *

Franz Kafka was the first person who took my spiritual life seriously, who talked to me like an adult and so strengthened my self-confidence. His interest in me was a wonderful gift to me. I was always conscious of this. Once I even expressed myself in this sense to him.

'Do I not waste your time? I am so stupid. You give me so much and I give you nothing.'

Kafka was plainly embarrassed by my words.

'Now, now,' he said soothingly. 'You are a child. You are not a robber. I do indeed give you my time, but it belongs not to me but to the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution; both of us conspire to rob it of my time. After all, that is splendid! Also you are

not stupid. So stop using such phrases, by which you will only force me to admit that I enjoy your youthful devotion and understanding.'

* * *

A walk on the Quay.

I told Kafka that I had been ill, had been in bed with influenza and worked at a play, called *Saul*.

Kafka took great interest in this literary venture, for which I wished to employ a three-storied stage. Three platforms, one above the other, were to represent three spiritual worlds: on the ground floor, the Street, or forum of the People; above it the King's Palace, or the house of the individual; and, yet above, the Temple of the spiritual-temporal power, through which the voice of the unseen speaks.

'So the whole is a pyramid, whose apex loses itself in the clouds,' said Franz Kafka. 'And the centre of gravity? Where is the centre of gravity in the world of your play?'

'Underneath, in the mass basis of the people,' I answered. 'In spite of a few individual characters, it is a play about the anonymous crowd.'

Franz Kafka contracted his heavy eyebrows, slightly protruded his under lip, moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, and without looking at me said:

'I think that you start from false premises. Anonymous means the same as nameless. The Jewish people, however, has never been nameless. On the contrary, it is the chosen race of a personal God which can never sink to the mean level of an anonymous and therefore soulless mass, as long as it can hold fast to the fulfilment of the Law. Mankind can only become a grey, formless, and therefore nameless mass through a fall from the Law which gives it form. But in that case there is no above and below any more; life is levelled out into mere existence; there is no struggle, no drama, only the

consumption of matter, decay. But that is not the world of the Bible and of Jewry.'

I defended myself.

'For me it isn't a matter of Jewry and the Bible. The biblical material is for me only a means to presenting the masses of today.'

Kafka shook his head.

'Exactly! What you are aiming at is false. You cannot turn life into an allegory of death. That would be sinful.'

'What do you mean by sin?'

'Sin is turning away from one's own vocation, misunderstanding, impatience, and sloth – that is sin. The poet has the task of leading the isolated and mortal into eternal life, the accidental into conformity to law. He has a prophetic task.'

'Then to write means to lead,' I said.

'The true word leads; the untrue misleads,' said Kafka. 'It is not an accident that the Bible is called Writ. It is the voice of the Jewish people, which does not belong to an historic yesterday, but is completely contemporary. In your play you treat it as if it were an historically mummified fact, and that is false. If I understand you rightly, you wish to bring the modern masses on to the stage. They have nothing in common with the Bible. That is the heart of your play. The people of the Bible is an association of individuals by means of a Law. But the masses of today resist every form of association. They split apart by reason of their own lawlessness. That is the motive power of their perpetual movement. The masses hurry, run, march in thunder through our era. Where to? Where have they come from? No one knows. The more they march, the less they achieve their goal. They use their strength to no purpose. They think they are on the move. And thus, marking time, they fall into the void. That is all. Mankind has lost its home.'

'Then how do you explain the growth of nationalism?' I asked.

'That is precisely the proof of what I say,' answered Franz Kafka. 'Men always strive for what they do not have. The technical advances which are common to all nations strip them more and more

of their national characteristics. Therefore they become nationalist. Modern nationalism is a defensive movement against the crude encroachments of civilization. One sees that best in the case of the Jews. If they felt at home in their environment and could easily come to terms with it, there would be no Zionism. But the pressure of our environment makes us see our own features. We are going home. To our roots.'

'And are you then convinced that Zionism is the only right road?'

Kafka gave an embarrassed smile.

'One only knows the rightness or wrongness of the road when one has reached the goal. At least now we are going. We are on the move, and so we live. Around us anti-semitism increases, but that is all to the good. The Talmud says that we Jews only yield our best, like olives, when we are crushed.'

'I believe that the progressive labour movement will not permit any further growth of anti-semitism,' I said.

But Franz Kafka only bowed his head sadly.

'You are mistaken. I believe that anti-semitism will also seize hold of the masses. One can see that happening in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution. It is a creation of the labour movement. It should therefore be filled with the radiant spirit of progress. But what happens? The Institution is a dark nest of bureaucrats, in which I function as the solitary display-Jew.'

'That is wretched,' I said.

'Yes, man is wretched, because amid the continually increasing masses he becomes minute by minute more isolated.'

* * *

With Franz Kafka in his office.

He sat tired behind his desk. His arms hanging down. Lips tightly pressed. Smiling, he stretched out his hand to me.

'I had a terribly bad night.'

'Have you been to the doctor?'

He pursed his mouth.

'The doctor ...'

He raised his left-hand palm upward, then let it fall.

'One cannot escape oneself. That is fate. The only possibility is to look on and forget that a game is being played with us.'

* * *

Frau Svátek, who lived in the Jeseniusgasse in Žižkov, used to work as a servant in my father's house in the mornings. In the afternoons she worked as a charwoman in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution. She saw me several times with Franz Kafka, whom she knew, and so one day she began to talk about him to me.

'Doktor Kafka is a fine man. He is quite different from the others. You can see that even in the way he gives you something. The others hand it to you in such a way that it almost burns you to take it. They don't give – they humiliate and insult you. One would often like to throw their tips away. But Doktor Kafka gives, really gives, in such a way that it's a pleasure. For instance, a bunch of grapes which he has not eaten that morning. They are leftovers. You know what they usually look like – with most people. But Doktor Kafka never leaves them looking like a tasteless lump. He leaves the grapes or the fruit nicely arranged on the plate. And when I come into the office, he says, by the way, could I possibly make use of them. Yes, Doktor Kafka does not treat me like an old char. He is a fine man.'

Frau Svátek was right. Kafka had the art of giving. He never said, 'Take this, it is a present.' When he gave me a book or a magazine, all he ever said was, 'There is no need to give it me back.'

* * *

We talked about N. I said that N. was stupid. Kafka replied:

'To be stupid is human. Many clever people are not wise, and

therefore in the last resort not even clever. They are merely inhuman out of fear of their own meaningless vulgarity.'

* * *

With Kafka was an official who had a rather rough manner of speaking.

'What sort of a man is that?' I asked, when we were alone in the office.

'That is Doktor N.,' said Kafka.

'A brute,' I said.

'Why? He merely follows a different kind of convention. Probably he has learned that good manners make silk purses out of sows' ears, so he prefers to wear homespun instead of a frock coat. That's all it is.'

* * *

A damp autumn, and a surprisingly hard and early winter made Kafka's illness worse.

His desk in the office stood empty and abandoned.

'He is feverish,' said Doktor Treml, who sat at the other desk. 'Perhaps we shall not see him again.'

I went sadly home.

But one day Franz Kafka was in the office again.

Pale, stooping, smiling.

In a tired, gentle voice he told me he had only come to hand over some documents and to fetch various personal papers from his desk. He said he was not well. In the next few days he was going to the High Tatra. To a sanatorium.

'That's good,' I said. 'Go as quickly as possible – if it is possible.'

Franz Kafka smiled sadly.

'That is precisely what is irritating and difficult. Life has so many possibilities, and each one only mirrors the inescapable impossibility of one's own existence.'

His voice broke into a dry convulsive cough, which he quickly mastered.

We smiled at each other.

'Look,' I said, 'everything will soon be all right.'

'It is already all right,' Franz Kafka said slowly. 'I have said yes to everything. In that way suffering becomes an enchantment, and death – it is only an ingredient in the sweetness of life.'

* * *

At parting before his journey to the sanatorium in the Tatra I said:

'You will recover and come back in good health. The future will make up for everything. Everything will change.'

Kafka, smiling, laid the index finger of his right hand on his chest.

'The future is already here within me. The only change will be to make visible the hidden wounds.'

I became impatient.

'If you do not believe in a cure, why are you going to the sanatorium?'

Kafka bowed over his writing-table.

'The accused always endeavours to secure a postponement of sentence.'

* * *

With my friend Helene Slaviček I returned from Chlumetz to Prague. We went to my father in his office, to announce our arrival. On the stairs we met Franz Kafka. I introduced him to Helene. Two days later he said to me:

'Women are snares, which lie in wait for men on all sides in order to drag them into the merely finite. They lose their dangers if one voluntarily falls into one of the snares. But if, as a result of

habit, one overcomes it, then all the jaws of the female trap open again.'

* * *

The young F. W. committed suicide because of an unhappy love affair.

We discussed the case.

Franz Kafka said during our conversation:

'What is love? After all, it is quite simple. Love is everything which enhances, widens, and enriches our life. In its heights and in its depths. Love has as few problems as a motor car. The only problems are the driver, the passengers, and the road.'

* * *

I told him about my school friend W., who when ten years old was seduced by his French governess and afterwards was afraid of all young girls, even his own sister, so that now he was under the medical attention of Doktor Pötzl, the psycho-analyst.

'Love always inflicts wounds which never heal, because love always appears hand in hand with filth,' said Kafka. 'Only the will of the loved one can divide the love from the filth. But someone as helpless as your young friend has no will of his own, and so he is infected by the filth. He is a victim to the bewilderment of adolescence. Such things can cause grave damage. A man's embittered features are often only the petrified bewilderment of a boy.'

* * *

Once when, during a walk, I talked about my friend Helene S., Franz Kafka said:

'In the moment of love a man is responsible not only to himself but to all other men. Yet at the same time he finds himself in a state of intoxication which impairs his powers of judgement. The content of the human I is then greater than the narrow field of vision of his immediate consciousness. Consciousness is only a part of the I. Yet every decision gives a new direction to the I. In this way the commonest and most difficult conflicts arise, through misunderstanding.'

* * *

In conversation about C. Kafka said:

'The root of the word sensuous is sense. This has a perfectly definite significance. One can achieve sense only through the senses. Of course, this path like every other has its dangers. One may prefer the means to the end. In this way one might end up in sensuality, which tends to distract one's attention from sense.'

* * *

I remember that I used to notice that Franz Kafka had a great liking for ironic puns and verbal tricks of a very personal kind. Yet in my notes I can find only one example.

I had told him that in the fourth form of my secondary school there used to be an active business in lending out copies of Otto Julius Bierbaum's novel, *Prince Kuckuk*.¹

'It was the description of his debauches that attracted us,' I said.

'Wastrel,' said Kafka. 'For me the word always conjures up the

¹ Julius Bierbaum's pornographic novel *Prinz Kuckuck* (1907) has the subtitle: *Taten, Meinungen und Hollenfahrt eines Wollüstlings* (*The Adventures, Opinions and Damnation of a Libertine*). Kafka here is playing on the words *Wüste* (waste) and *Wüstling* (debauchee), which has here been translated as 'wastrel'.

idea of a waste land, of abandonment. The wastrel is abandoned in the waste.'

'Woman is the waste,' I said.

Franz Kafka shrugged his shoulders.

'Perhaps. The well of pleasure is the well of his loneliness. The more he drinks, the more sober he becomes. In the end he can no longer quench his thirst. So he goes on drinking, but his thirst is never satiated. That is what a wastrel is.'

* * *

Opposite the old building of the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution on the Poříč was an old hotel painted a golden brown, *Zum goldenen Fasan*. It was a one-storied house frequented mostly by the women who paraded to and fro in front of the hotel. Once when I had been waiting for Doktor Kafka in front of the Insurance office, he said:

'I saw from up above how intensely you were eyeing the girls parading. So I hurried.'

I felt myself blushing, so I said:

'The women don't interest me. As a matter of fact, I am only interested in – in their customers.'

Kafka gave me a sidelong glance, looked straight ahead, and after a while said:

'The Czech language is wonderfully penetrating and precise. The term "will o' the wisp" (*bludčika*) for this kind of women is wonderfully true. How wretched, abandoned, frozen men must be, when they wish to warm themselves by these marsh gases! They must be so miserable and so lost that any inquisitive glance might hurt them. So one ought not to watch them. Yet if one turned one's head away, they might take it as a sign of contempt. It is difficult ... The road to love always goes through filth and misery. Yet if one despised the road one might easily miss the goal.

Therefore one must humbly suffer the various misadventures of the road. Only thus will one reach one's goal – perhaps.'

* * *

During the period of my visits to Franz Kafka in the office on the Poříč, my parents' marriage had been going through a severe crisis. I suffered because of the domestic quarrels. I complained of this to Kafka and admitted that the troubles around me were the decisive motive for my literary efforts.

'If things were different at home, perhaps I would not write at all,' I said. 'I want to escape the unrest, to shut out the voices around me and within me, and so I write. Just as some people make silly objects with a fret-saw in order to get through the boredom of their evenings at home, so I patch words and sentences and paragraphs together, to have an excuse for being alone and to cut myself off from my surroundings, which suffocate me.'

'You are quite right,' said Kafka. 'Many men do the same. In one of his letters Flaubert writes that his novel is a rock to which he clings in order not to be drowned in the waves of the world around him.'

'Well, I am a Gustav too, but not a Flaubert,' I said smiling.

'The technique of spiritual hygiene is not reserved for rare individuals. So that Flaubert's name will not embarrass you, I will confess that at a certain period I did exactly as you are doing. Only in my case things were a little more complicated. By scribbling I run ahead of myself in order to catch myself up at the finishing post. I cannot run away from myself.'

* * *

The trouble between my parents was reflected in my conversations with Franz Kafka.

'I cannot bear what is called family life,' I said.

'That is wrong,' said Kafka, with unspoken sympathy. 'How would it be if you were merely to observe the life of your family? The family would think that you were sharing their life and were content. And in fact this would be partly true. You would be living with your family, but on different terms from them. That would be all. You would be outside the circle, with your face turned inwards towards the family, and that would be enough. Perhaps now and then you might even see your own image reflected in your family's eyes – quite small and as if drawn on a glass ball in the garden.'

'What you propose is a pure course of spiritual acrobatics,' I said.

'Quite right,' Kafka nodded. 'They are the acrobatics of everyday. They are dangerous, because normally one is not conscious of them. Yet they may break, not one's neck, but the soul itself. One does not die of it, but continues to exist as one of life's deserving pensioners.'

'Who, for example?'

'No one. One can only give examples of exceptions. But so-called reasonable people are usually those who have been disabled by life. And they are the dominant majority, and do not tolerate examples which reflect unfavourably on themselves.'

* * *

Once when I was again complaining about the quarrels in my family, Kafka said:

'Do not excite yourself. Be calm. Quietness is indeed a sign of strength. But quietness may also help one to achieve strength. That is the law of opposites. So be quiet. Calmness and quietness make one free – even on the scaffold.'

* * *

I told Kafka that my father would not allow me to study music.

'And are you going to submit to your father's command?' Kafka asked.

'Why should I?' I answered. 'I have a head of my own.'

Kafka looked at me very seriously.

'Using one's own head is often the easiest way of losing it,' he said. 'Of course, I am not saying anything against your studying music. On the contrary! The only strong and deep passions are those which can stand the test of reason.'

'Music is not a passion but an art,' I said.

But Franz Kafka smiled.

'There is passion behind every art. That is why you fight and suffer for your music. That is why you do not submit to your father's orders, because you love music and all that it implies more than your own parents. But in art that is always the way. One must throw one's life away in order to gain it.'

* * *

When the quarrel between my parents had reached the stage of divorce proceedings, I told Kafka that I was going to leave home.

Franz Kafka slowly nodded.

'That is painful. But it is the best one can do in such circumstances. There are some things one can only achieve by a deliberate leap in the opposite direction. One has to go abroad in order to find the home one has lost.'

When I told him that I would work as a musician at night, he said:

'That is very bad for one's health. And besides you tear yourself out of the human community. The night side of life becomes its day-side for you, and what is day for other men changes into a

dream. Without noticing it, you have emigrated to the antipodes of the world around you. Now, when you are young, you will not notice anything wrong, but later, in a few years time, you will shut your eyes in horror before the void within you. You will lose the power of vision, and the waves of the world will close over your head.'

* * *

After the first hearing of my parents' divorce case, I visited Franz Kafka.

I was very distraught, filled with pain and therefore – unjust.

When I had exhausted my complaints, Kafka said to me:

'Just be quiet and patient. Let evil and unpleasantness pass quietly over you. Do not try to avoid them. On the contrary, observe them carefully. Let active understanding take the place of reflex irritation, and you will grow out of your trouble. Men can achieve greatness only by surmounting their own littleness.'

* * *

In the summer of 1924 I was in Obergeorgenthal near Brux. On Friday June 20, I repeat Friday June 20, I received a letter from a friend in Prague, the painter Erich Hirt.

He wrote, 'I have just learnt from the editorial staff of the *Tagblatt* that the writer Franz Kafka died on June 3 in a small private sanatorium in Kierling near Vienna. He was, however, buried here in Prague on Wednesday June 11, 1924, in the Jewish cemetery in Strasznitz.'

I looked at the little picture of my father which hung on the wall over my bed.

On May 14, 1924, he left this life of his own free will.

Twenty-one days later, on June 3, Kafka died.

Twenty-one days later ...

Twenty-one days ...

Twenty-one ...

Exactly my own age, as the emotional and intellectual horizon
of my youth broke up.